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OR, Tom Ringbolt's Cruiser Chief.

A STORY OF
Blackbeard's Buried Treasure.
BY BURKE BRENTFORD.

CHAPTER I.

VAL VENTURE'S COMPACT.

AN elderly man and a youth were about separating, after the exchange of heated words, in the dooryard of a pretentious country-house on the shore of Norwalk Bay, in the summer of 1777. The former was Captain Hiram Ferris, the owner of the house.

His companion was Valentine Venture, a handsome, gallant-looking young fellow of scarcely more than twenty, though his frank, open brow

"HELLO! I SUSPECTED AS MUCH," EXCLAIMED VAL. "IT IS THE VIRAGO!"

was now clouded and his dauntless dark eyes filled with gloomy fire.

"So, sir!" exclaimed the latter, in a voice and manner which he strove to make respectful; "this hard answer is then your ultimatum?"

"It is!" was the other's testy reply. "When you next apply to me for my daughter's hand, if ever again you do, but which isn't very likely, let it be as master of a vessel of your own, and with five hundred pounds cash; then you may find me more complacent, but not until then. God be with you, my aspiring young friend, and may you walk in fear of the Lord!"

The last words were spoken in a nasal, sanctimonious tone—for a Puritan of the old-time Puritans was Captain Hiram when in his native Connecticut, though with more than a suspicion of smuggling and slave-trading in his money-grasping antecedents—which was not without its sarcastic sting.

"I am *already* a vessel-owner!" cried Val, impatiently. "Look at the Osprey where she rocks at anchor yonder, like a sea-bird at rest!"

The elder man glanced at the object indicated with a contemptuous laugh.

"A smack, an oyster-boat!" he ejaculated. "Boy, do you call that a blue-water skimmer? I've had bigger and better for my gig!"

"Oh, this is shameful of you, sir!" exclaimed the young man, passionately. "I make my livelihood out of her, at all events, and you called my father your friend when he also mastered the tight little beauty in the old days. Were it not for my mother, as you know, I might even now be a privateersman, with more than the money you mention, as the price of your daughter's hand, in my locker."

"Privateersman, indeed! Why not pirate at once?"

"Better a privateersman in the cause of our Independence," was the hot retort, "than a base Tory at heart, perhaps only waiting for the presence of the red-coats hereabouts, from the city and harbor of New York already in their possession, to become one in practice."

Captain Ferris bit his lip, for there was more truth in the insinuation than he would willingly have avowed.

"Valentine, you are insolent!" he exclaimed. "Begone!"

"Wait, sir! Don't take the words you stung from me as evidence of deliberate disrespect on my part. Remember, Captain Hiram, you were my father's friend."

"I don't forget that," a little less harshly. "Well for you that I do not!"

"Then you will stand by your bargain?" eagerly. "Master of my own ship and five hundred pounds in my locker—those are your terms?"

"Yes," slowly. "I have passed my word."

Val's face cleared, for Hiram Ferris's word, in spite of his cold, hard nature, was accounted as good as his bond. But then the trouble reappeared on the youth's brow.

"One word more!" he said. "You will give me how long to fill the conditions?"

"One year."

Val winced. It was short enough grace to accomplish so much, even in the heat of the American Revolution, which was the sailor-man's opportunity, if any one's. But his dauntlessness was speedily to the fore again.

"One thing more, sir! In the mean time, you will not favor any other suitor for Mabel's hand—not even gold-laced Lord Rathspey, the British naval lieutenant," with a jealous flash, "should he appear once more?"

"She shall be perfectly free," was the cautious reply, "on the added condition, on your part, Val Venture, that you shall not seek to communicate with her after this day until you shall have fulfilled the terms I have proposed."

The young man seemed to be having an internal struggle, out of which, however, he came with a confident and proud air.

"Agreed, sir!" he said. "It is a compact between us, Captain Ferris, and there is my hand on it!"

The hand-pressure was exchanged, earnestly on the youth's, coldly on the veteran's part, and then Val Venture, with a parting obeisance, passed rapidly out of the yard and down among the rocks and trees toward the marshy bay-shore.

The retired shipmaster looked after the stalwart retreating figure until it was out of sight with an inscrutable air.

"There is an 'if' in that compact, my bold youth," he muttered, "which I shall take care you don't get over, if continued solicitude for your widowed mother can keep you plodding in your present poverty, hereabouts. My daughter, Mabel, the apple of my eye, for such as you, and with the fine chance she has of becoming Lady Rathspey? Not were you fifty times the gallant, fearless sailor lad you are, and fifty times the son of my old friend. Ha, ha, ha!—who cut me out of the only woman I ever truly loved!"

Turning slowly into the house:

"Where is my daughter?" he demanded of a negro serving-man, a slave, who was crossing the spacious hall.

The reply was to the effect that Miss Mabel was gone on a visit to the Widow Venture's cottage, as was her frequent custom.

"Request her to attend me in my study immediately on her return. Meanwhile, send John Gabo to me without delay."

The servant obediently disappeared, and Captain Ferris entered his study, a well-furnished but gloomy apartment, half-cabinet and half-strong-room in general appearance, at the further end of the broad hall.

John Gabo, Ferris's steward on shore, as he had been on shipboard for many a stormy and adventurous voyage, was a Portuguese half-caste, by a Guinea negro mother; a close-lipped, cruel-eyed, yellow-skinned man of more than middle-age, of muscular frame, of sinister aspect, and with a dangerous temper, though a faithful follower.

When he made his appearance in the cabinet, in a strangely silent-footed way, Ferris was exploring the contents of a heavy iron chest, which seemed to be filled with documents of various sizes and shapes.

The latter selected one of these, and handed it to the steward.

"Show that to the Widow Venture without delay," he said. "It is the mortgage-deed on her cottage and grounds, in the sum of one hundred pounds, which secures me in money loaned her husband, Skipper Ralph Venture, the year previous to his loss at sea, and now long overdue. I must have the money inside of a week, or there will be an execution. Say, however, that, in consideration of old friendships, I will accept a gradual liquidation of the claim in the sum of four pounds a month, if her son, Valentine, can guarantee such payments out of his present earnings. Otherwise, I must have the entire amount by forced sale of the place. Go!"

Gabo was withdrawing without a word, when his master called him back.

"Stay!" peremptorily. "Your son, Caliban, is to have nothing to do with the execution, in case the widow forces me to one. I won't have Valentine unnecessarily angered by contact with that nondescript monster, where there is already such bad blood between them. We must act a Christian part, and in fear of the Lord, come what may. That is all, Gabo."

The latter then disappeared obsequiously, like a species of automaton.

Captain Hiram Ferris was the Sir Giles Overreach of his district, and this man Gabo, was his Marall. This is a characterization of the unenviable relationship between master and man in a nutshell.

"So!" chuckled Ferris as he relocked his strong-box. "I rather think Master Valentine Venture will have something else besides wife-winning to occupy his thoughts and industry for the forthcoming twelvemonth."

In the mean time, Val Venture, when half-way down the wooded eminence, stopped, delighted, as a clear fresh voice was heard singing along an intersecting path.

"It is she!" he said to himself. "It is Mabel!"

Then the singing gave place to an exclamation, and Mabel Ferris herself, a charmingly lovely girl of seventeen, with blue eyes and a wealth of golden hair done up demurely under her Puritan bonnet, came to meet him with outstretched hands.

Easy to see that they were lovers and had been for long, though, save for a deepening of the color in the girl's pure cheeks, and a new animation in the youth's dark face, there was but little of the emotional demonstrativeness in their greeting which might have obtained at the present day.

Both were Puritan-bred, though, if love-making was more sober in those days, it was none the less illustrative of the proverb, "Still waters run deep."

"And how is it with thee, Valentine?" asked Mabel, after they had clasped hands and she had simply inclined her forehead for his chaste greeting kiss. "Not hopefully, I fear, by the troubled look that seems but newly chased away from your face and eyes!"

"Thou art right, sweetheart! Loving thee so dearly as I do, I have but little cause for satisfaction. I have talked again with thy father, Mabel."

"Ah!" with a swift look. "Quick! tell me all that passed between my father and you, Valentine."

He did so without any further preamble.

It was evident the girl was no less disappointed than he, though she presently managed to look up with a smile.

"Well, what is a twelvemonth, after all?" she said. "You shall win me from my hard father in that time, Valentine, and meantime I shall be true and wait."

"You will be and do that, Mabel?"

"Surely you would not doubt my love?"

"But if that titled Britisher in gold-lace should again—"

She clapped her hand over his lips.

"Nay, I will not hear of him again!" she chided. "I detest his very name!"

"Oh!" cried the young man, joyously embracing her; "fear not that I shall not win and wear you in the next year, my darling, with this motto for my heartening, 'All for Love!'"

CHAPTER II.

THORNS BY THE WAY.

BUT Mabel only momentarily submitted to her lover's embrace.

"We must part now, Valentine," she said, sadly. "My father's wishes must be obeyed."

"Yes; we must part!" echoed the other, miserably.

"And, listen to me, dearest!" continued the girl, seriously. "If you would really and truly win me, it must be something else than 'All for Love' with you in the coming year of probation."

"I am not sure that I quite understand you, Mabel."

"No; and you an American and a Patriot?"

"Oh, forgive me, dearest! A fitting rebuke, truly, with Howe and Clinton already in possession of New York, and our Washington and his troops scarcely heard from in the wilds of Pennsylvania or New Jersey. From this day I am a participant in the fight, with this for my motto: All for my country, and, if aught remains, that for love!"

"That is better, Valentine!" said the girl, with kindling eyes. "It makes me proud of you!"

"Would that your father were as patriotic in these troublous times as you are, Mabel! There are times when I fear him to be half-hearted in our cause."

"What are your plans?" she asked, abruptly, and with a swift dismissive gesture.

He laughed gayly.

"Can a sailor have but one outlook, and that one the blue water? I shall be a privateersman, Mabel. I have been settling that in my mind for several days. Tell me, are you not from my mother's cottage but now?"

"Yes, Valentine."

"I shall see her to-day, and arrange for a prolonged absence. There are thirty pounds, or several hundreds of our Continental dollars, of my savings, which, together with her garden products, ought to keep her in heart for the coming year. For the rest, I have no particular plan, though my staunch mate, Ringbolt, has some sort of bold project in his head for the pair of us. At the worst, I can try my luck in any one of the privateers secretly fitting out between here and New London. You know, I have my credentials as an able seaman and competent navigator, from the numerous voyages I made with my poor father, before settling down to the tame off-shore life hereabouts on my mother's account."

They discussed his plans more at length, and then came to their parting.

A whole year's separation for youthful hearts that beat but for one another! Sad as was the wrench, painful the anguish, it had to be undergone.

A last breathless embrace, a last lingering kiss, inarticulate words, strivings for strength that end in weakness—

"—Sudden partings, such as press the life from out young hearts, and choking sighs, which ne'er might be repeated; who could guess if ever more should meet those mutual eyes?"—

then, a blended sob, the girl flying affrightedly up the steep path, not trusting herself to look behind; the youth—alone! no more, perhaps in the entire stipulated year, to be companioned by that sweet presence, to hearken for the music of that footfall, to anticipate the delectable tryst, the touch of that magic hand, the quivering beauty of the beloved voice, with "I love you!" for its delicious burden in the golden interview!

Recovering his firmness, Val Venture was continuing his way down the wooded path, when approaching voices from below, one of which he recognized with a jealous thrill, caused him to slip to one side and wait.

The next moment a splendid-looking British naval officer, in all the glory of gold lace and cocked hat, passed carelessly up the path, humming a roundelay, and followed obsequiously by a coxswain's mate, bearing a gilded box which looked as if it might contain something both dainty and valuable.

Venture stepped back into the path, and looked after the disappearing figures with a lowering gaze, in which no little surprise was mingled.

"Oho, my Lord Rathspey!" he muttered; "so you are back again at your foppish wooing, and doubtless with pretty gifts for a vain girl's or a covetous father's admiration? But you'll have no chance with Mabel, as you'll presently find.—Ha! an idea. Where are your saucy war-schooner and transport? The Virago cannot be far away. Could Ringbolt have had her in mind, I wonder? We shall see."

Quickening his pace, he had reached the foot of the hill, with Ringbolt in the yawl waiting for him in sight on the water-side of the intervening marsh, when he was overtaken by an extraordinary figure that had come silently chasing down the path after him.

Venture started back, with an expression of disgust and anger.

"Caliban!" he exclaimed.

Imagine a dusky and misshapen giant, with the features of an idiot and a fiend combined—a cavernous mouth, the eyes of a wolf, the nose

of a pig, coarse black hair standing stiffly on his small, egg-shaped head—and, in spite of his dwarfish, distorted frame, evidently the possessor of enormous muscular strength, together with elfish alertness and rapidity of movement—a travesty of the human form—a nondescript, a monster!

Such was Caliban Gabo, aptly enough named, the terrible, and, strange to say, the cherished offspring of Hiram Ferris's steward by a mongrel wife, half negro and half Narragansett Indian, who had been burnt as a witch twenty years previously, when this being was but five years old.

But, Caliban was neither dull-witted nor absolutely brutish, for all of his dreadful aspect, though dangerous to the core.

As an offset to the young man's loathing demeanor, he stretched his powerful but crooked arms and legs, and, opening his enormous mouth, which seemed to fairly split his head in half from ear to ear, roared with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! I spied you bidding good-by to the sweetheart. But is she for you? Not so, not so! Rather the sea-lord, rather even Caliban than you! Ho, ho, ho!"

From his earliest boyhood, Val had regarded the creature as a species of realistic nightmare.

"Stand from before me, Caliban!" he exclaimed. "I have no patience for your extravagances now."

"Extravagances? Ha, ha, ha!" and the creature planted himself yet more squarely in the other's path, with his fists on his hips, his wicked eyes blinking like a snake's. "Why, little sailor-man, even your mistress could not refuse my suit, if backed by the buried treasure of Ram's Island in my clutch. Ho, ho, ho! Shall I give it up—the golden secret of Blackbeard, the pirate—to the sea-lord in his gold lace, or shall I keep it for myself? That is the question."

"Out of my path!" furiously.

As there was nothing in response but another taunting roar, the young man pushed the wretch violently to one side, and hurried on with a bound.

He looked back from the center of the marshes, but Caliban had silently disappeared.

A moment later, Val sprang into the yawl, and his faithful mate, Ringbolt, forthwith began to pull out in the direction of the Osprey.

"Master Val Venture," began Ringbolt, when about half the water-space had been covered, "be you still in the privateering mind?"

"I am that—more than ever, Ringbolt," was the reply.

"And would you like to see my idea put into ship-shape sailing trim?"

Val nodded.

The course of the yawl was accordingly altered, and presently, as the lower bay-point was rounded, there was a burst of seaman-like admiration from the young man's lips.

There, riding silently at anchor out in the bright offing, was as beautiful a yacht-built schooner, of about six hundred tons, as had ever, up to that period in the ship-building art, brightened a sailor's eyes and heart.

"Hallo! I suspected as much," exclaimed Val, after a moment's study of the schooner's raking build and perfect lines. "It is the Virago!"

"And my ideal!" supplemented the old sailor, pausing on his oars.

Val looked at him curiously.

"Ain't she a beauty, though?" commented the other, enthusiastically. "Yankee-built, though Britisher-commanded; berths for a crew of ninety-eight men, to say nothing of the marines; four twenty-four pounders, without counting her bow-gun and the thirty-two pounder brass swivel at her stern-chasings; stanch as a frigate, fleet as a sea-bird, trim as an admiral's cock-boat. Oh, but ain't she a witch?"

"Ringbolt, what do you mean by saying that Lord Rathspey's Virago is your idea?"

"Can't you guess, my hearty?"

"You mean that we shall essay her capture?"

"In course, I do! and this very night!"

"What are the chances?"

"Wait and watch."

At that moment a long boat, loaded down with red-coated marines, was seen to put from the war-schooner's weather side.

CHAPTER III. A BRAVE PROJECT.

PROJUDGED as they were from observation by the jutting sand-spit behind which they were hovering, Val and his companion could leisurely take in the situation.

Another and yet another boat-load of marines followed the first, and these were succeeded by two boats freighted with British jack-tars, all heading in procession around the bight of Ram's Island, and doubtless for some point to the eastward along the coast.

"Where will they land?" asked Val, when the last boat had disappeared.

"At Saugatuck Point."

"What is the enterprise?"

"A march into the interior, to surprise and

capture the military stores at Danbury. Don't look so concerned. We can't intercept 'em. Lieutenant Rathspey was rowed ashore while you were absent. He will doubtless command the expedition. Comrade, do you begin to twig?"

"Yes; but explain more fully."

"Good! Messmate, there's probably less than fifty men left on the schooner, and that shore-trick is bound to last all night. The question is just this: Who shall welcome 'em back to yonder craft when they return, say at daybreak to-morrow, red-handed from the destruction of our patriot stores at Danbury?"

"By Jupiter! we shall!" cried Val Venture, with flashing eyes. "Here is our chance for a privateering cut-out for us in the loveliest Yankee-built war-schooner ever prostituted to the uses of British invasion! We were fools not to make the attempt!"

Ringbolt nodded approvingly.

"Shall I make for the smack now, that we may set the ball to rolling, master?" he asked.

"Wait; there is something else."

Val accordingly mentioned what Caliban Gabo had said about the treasure supposed to have been buried somewhere on Ram's Island.

Ringbolt at once grew thoughtful. He was an old Down-East sailor who had been in almost every quarter of the globe before attaching himself to Val Venture's humble fortunes, a year or two previously, and had also been an intimate friend of the young man's father, in former years. He was a man widely known along the seaboard, not less for his shrewd horse-sense, as it is called, than for his seamanship, courage and general ability.

"Look here, captain, there may be something in that," declared the old sailor, at last.

"So I think," was the response.

"You see," Ringbolt went on, "there's never been any doubt in my mind as to Blackbeard having stowed away a barrel or two of his doubloons along among some one of these Sound islands. Some used to think it was one of the Thimbles; others fixed on Goose Island; others again fixed on Big Gull as the spot. But, somehow, I have allers had a sneaking lee-way toward Ram's over yonder as bein' the most likely plant."

"Yes; and Caliban would be likely to know, would he not?"

"Who more likely than that she-devil's dwarf? Old Gabo, his father, was sartainly one of Blackbeard's murdering crew, or his Portugee dad before him was. And then, John Gabo talks and walks in his sleep. Yes, yes; who would be more likely to know than Caliban, the monstrosity?"

"I have a plan!" said Val Venture, abruptly.

"Give it a name, messmate."

"In the first place, how many men can we muster for our attempt upon the schooner, between, say, now and midnight?"

"Forty, at least, and not one but would be crazy over the job. You see, there's a big crew of 'em in from the fishing at Fairfield. By Jupiter! between Stamford Point and Bridgeport, mate, we ought to get fully fifty together, though fish-knives and pitchforks would have to answer for weepens at the start."

"Good! A surprise must answer for the rest. This is my plan then, old friend: Caliban may be intending to locate the treasure some time to-night. We shall have to spare six men to be on the watch for him, on the island, while we are getting together our recruits. Suppose we succeed in capturing the Virago. What better outfit than to send a boat off to the Ram's for a few potfuls of gold? We can then lie in wait for the return of Lord Rathspey's expedition, and sink 'em with hot shot while the five boats are putting off from Saugatuck."

"Hurrah! And then, ho for blue water and prize-money! Comrade, there's our future privateer!"

Then Ringbolt, in his enthusiasm, proffered a flask, to drink success to the daring venture—Val, however, smilingly declining to thus christen the initiatory act.

The old sailor took a moderate pull at the liquor on his own account.

Then he resumed his oars, and presently they were on board the Osprey, where a man and boy had been left in charge.

They tripped anchor at once, and taking advantage of a fair wind began coasting at a lively rate in the fulfillment of their daring project.

It was shortly before noon when the enterprise was put on foot, and, to make a preparatory story short, by ten at night, by secretly drumming up all along the coast-line from Stamford to Bridgeport, a stretch of eighteen miles, and including, besides those named, the thriving little ports of Norwalk, Darien and Fairfield, together with the adjacent back-countries, a force of six fishing-smacks, with forty-eight men, all daring and patriotic spirits, with Val Venture in general command, had been mustered in the bight between Ram's Island and the mainland.

Four men had already been posted on Ram's Island, with the necessary instructions.

The night was starry, but with no moon, and a light wind.

The expedition silently got under way at eleven, and, with the Osprey in the lead, rather drifted than sailed, with just enough canvas spread for steering-way, out toward the spot where the Virago was swinging lazily and unsuspectingly at anchor, with nothing more than a jack-lantern in her fore rigging.

Fortunately for the patriots, the schooner, though fitted up for an emergency, had thus far been more in use as a transport than as a fighting-craft, which left her less under regular quarter-deck discipline than would otherwise have been the case.

Besides, the absence of her marines, together with a large proportion of her ship's company, seemed to have rather lulled the remainder into a false sense of security than to have made them wider awake, as it should have done.

As a consequence, the Osprey and two other smacks were fairly bulwark to bulwark with the schooner before their proximity was so much as suspected.

"Watch, ho!" bawled the sleepy lookout, springing out of a drowse in the cat-heads, and rubbing his eyes. "A surprise!"

It was a surprise!

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before he went down before a blow from Ringbolt's fist; and then, with a ringing Yankee cheer, and Val Venture in the lead, the boarders from the three smacks poured in over the star-board rail; while, almost simultaneously, the remaining smacks brought up rushing on the opposite side, and fairly tumbled their twenty men, led by an old whaling skipper, Silas Dunbar by name, upon the white deck from that quarter.

The surprise of the Virago was complete.

Though only armed, for the most part, with hatchets, belaying-pins, marlinespikes, old boat-hooks, hay-forks, fish-knives, and similarly primitive weapons, the assailants swept the deck and overpowered the watch of twelve men in a twinkling.

Five minutes later, all the small-arms had been secured, including the cutlasses and hatchets hung around the mainmast, and the firearms in the cabin and gun-room, and the capture was thus rendered complete, without the loss of a life on either side.

After the formal submission of the crew, forty-six men in all, had been received by lantern-light, and the prisoners placed under guard, Val Venture, from a commanding position on the poop, called out:

"Men and compatriots! who do you choose for your leader and commander henceforth on this crack craft?"

"You!" was the thundered and unanimous response.

"I accept the authority," was the calm and dignified reply. "Henceforth let this good ship be known as the Spray Sprite—letter-of-marque, if we can make her so, privateer if not. Tom Ringbolt, I name you as my first officer; Silas Dunbar," pointing him out, "you as second mate; Dick Maltby," singling a hale New Bedford fellow, well known for his bravery and seamanship, "you as boatswain. We take possession of this craft in the name of our new nation, as recently adopted by the Congress at Philadelphia, and already submitted to the State Legislatures for indorsement—the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA! Boatswain, pipe all hands to quarters, as a ceremony to hauling down yon British flag, and running up our free standard in its place!"

There was a fresh cheer; the newly-created boatswain clapped his fingers to his lips and improvised a whistle that went out, like an eagle's scream, over the waters, now brightening under a rising moon, and, while Captain Venture produced a roll of bunting from under his coat—he had secured it three days previous from an influential friend, fresh from Philadelphia—a young fellow, who had got hold of a kettle-drum in the gun-room, rolled out a reveille with spirited enthusiasm.

Then heads were reverently bared as the new ensign of the new nation—a fair enough approximation to the glorious and immortal Stars and Stripes as subsequently adopted—was run up to the gaff, in the moonlight, in place of the British flag which had flaunted there so insolently before; there followed another tumultuous cheer; Tom Ringbolt broke a bottle of Medford rum over the figure-head, exclaiming in a loud voice, "SPRAY SPRITE hereafter, while a plank floats or a rope's yarn holds!" and the send-off of the new privateer upon her eventful career was an accomplished fact.

An hour later, everything having been made snug and quiet on board, and the fishing-smacks having been sent back to their respective homes under as few men as could conveniently man them, Valentine Venture, leaving Silas Dunbar in temporary command, and accompanied solely by Ringbolt, pushed off in a small boat for Ram's Is and

CHAPTER IV.

THE PIRATE'S TREASURE.

"CAPTAIN VENTURE," inquired Tom Ringbolt, with profound respectfulness, when they were on their way to the island, about two

miles away, "might I presume to ax you what your standin' measure is?"

"Certainly you may, Mr. Ringbolt," replied Val, falling in with his companion's mood. "I am five feet eleven in my stockings."

"Humph!"

"Why were you curious upon *that* point, Mr. Ringbolt?"

"Oh, nothing much, sir; only I was under the impression that you might have growed to eleven feet six in the last hour!"

Val burst into his hearty laugh.

"Oh, I shall try to wear my honors modestly, old messmate, I promise you that!" he cried. "But, really, there isn't one of us men in to-night's adventure who hasn't a right to feel a little taller in his inches thereby. Don't you think so?"

"May I be booked for Davy Jones's Locker if I don't!" was the old sailor's honest response. "It's a capture that ought to make a stir in the country, if it doesn't get us a vote of thanks from the Congress at Philadelphia!"

"You think so?"

"Sartain as gunpowder! Let us only supplement to-night's work by beating back Lord Rathspey's marauders on their return to Saugatuck by daybreak, and it will equal the capture of a line battle-ship."

"There is no reason why we shouldn't continue our success to that extent. We have certainly enough experienced men among us to man the Spray Sprite's guns; there is little danger, I think, in those who have returned with the smacks giving away our secret to the enemy, and from what I saw of our prisoners, there are at least a round dozen of American-born men among them—the victims of British search-warrants and press-gangs—and experienced men-o'-war's-men by this time, at that, who will be but too glad to sign papers with the rest of us."

"Right you are, my hearty! Oh, we'll have another surprise-party in store for the shore-expeditioners!"

"Besides," continued Captain Val, half to himself, "a fresh success in this matter will also enable us to pay a good-by visit to my mother, which I have thus far been compelled to neglect."

"Aha! and if you might only pour her lap full of Pirate Blackbeard's buried gold-pieces, into the bargain! Eh, my sea-rover?"

"I'm afraid that is almost too much to hope for."

"Perhaps so. Well, it would only be deferring the happiness till we begin to rake in the prizes, with cash on the nail for 'em in any one of half a dozen French ports, to say nothing of the chance plunder in the mean time. Ah, Captain Val, that is the sea-life for a true sea-dog, arter all! Share and share alike on the capstan-head, and the devil take the blood and powder smile! Dash my binnacle lights, if there's aught like it, all the world over, blue water or green, head-winds or a free gale abaft!"

"Tell me truly, Ringbolt," said Val, very gravely, "if you were ever a pirate yourself, as I have heard it whispered."

Ringbolt blinked at his companion owlishly in the moonlight, and then emitted a hoarse, chuckling little laugh from somewhere far down in his hairy throat.

"I say, captain!"

"Yes, Mr. Ringbolt."

"If any one should insist on axin' yer *that* question, by way of settin' them whispers to rest, one way or t'other—"

"Yes, old friend; and what then?"

"Just tell 'em—you don't know!"

Val laughed and then sighed. He would gladly have disbelieved that Ringbolt had ever sailed in a genuine corsair, but was content to accept him as the sterling, honest old salt he had ever proved himself in their associations.

Piracy was so common in those days that a seafaring man might include a cruise or two under the black flag in the course of his career without incurring the obloquy that would attach to a similar moral lapse at the present time.

Ram's Island, which was now close at hand, is the largest of several off-shore rocky and sandy reefs, more or less overgrown with bushes and scrub, a little to the southwest of the mouth of Norwalk Bay. None of them have ever been occupied, save by an occasional fisherman's hut, though it was a sometime custom to pasture flocks upon them.

The island looked singularly desolate as they cautiously approached it, not knowing as yet if Caliban had made his appearance there to the men stationed on watch, or not.

Running up into a deep cove capable of affording concealment for their boat, they there chanced upon the other boat in which the watchers must have reached the place.

"We must explore with caution," said Val, in a low voice. "From the silence that prevails, our men may even now be surveying the non-descript's movements on the inner beach."

Ringbolt nodded.

They then landed, and, after making fast, stealthily crossed the intervening rise in the

surface, which was thickly grown with scrub-oaks and hemlocks, still wondering why their approach had not been noticed and signaled by any one of the men on guard.

As they made their way over the rise, however, a scratching, scraping sound, interspersed with short grunting respirations, as of one engaged in laboriously digging, or in striving to move some heavy object, became apparent.

Then, as they came in view of the hard, sheltered, yet moonlighted, beach beyond, they paused, momentarily appalled by the unexpected and horrible spectacle that was presented to them.

Caliban was standing in a large, deep trench, which he had excavated and was still industriously engaged in enlarging with pick and spade, his huge and misshapen figure presenting a singularly ghoulish and unearthly aspect as it rose and stooped in the exigencies of his task.

Outside of the trench were two rusty chests, one of which had been broken open with the pick-axe, to the disclosure of sundry canvas bags, which were seen, through some of them having been ripped open by the same rude strokes which had burst their common receptacle, to be filled to bursting with broad, shining gold-pieces.

Scattered here and there about the hole, in various distorted attitudes, were the lifeless and appallingly mutilated bodies of the four men who had been secreted upon the island!

Caliban's boat lay in the water a short distance away, secured to a projecting rock by a long and stout painter, while there were hanging partly over its thwarts several lengths of a strong chain cable, which he had probably brought to assist in dragging the anticipated treasure-chests over the sands to the water's edge, and thence into the craft.

The explanation of this terrible scene was sufficiently manifest to both the horror-stricken witnesses.

The four watchers, probably neglectful of the repeated warnings they had been given as to the enormous strength, feline alertness and fiendish ferocity of the giant dwarf, or dwarfed giant, whichever he might most appropriately be designated, had doubtless rushed upon him in a body at the very outset of his excavating operations, only to fall the victims to his inhuman prowess of self-defense.

Perhaps six men—as it had originally been intended to place on watch—no less than the four, would under similar circumstances have fared no better at his ruthless hands.

At last Caliban, who was, by this time, standing breast-deep in the trench, tossed his tools out over the edge, and, raising his crooked and prodigious arms over his head, with his hidden face upturned to the moonlight, gave vent to a long and relieved yawn, or stretching of his muscles.

"The third and the last!" he exclaimed, exultingly. "Oh, you enemies, you envious devils!" shaking his knotted fists mockingly at the surrounding corpses; "you would have interfered with my treasure-resurrection, eh? But, how I smashed and pulverized you! Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! With all this blood-stained wealth at my command, what may not I, even the despised Caliban, aspire to! Even Mabel can be bought to smile upon me then! Oh! and what will Papa Gabo say when he finds that I have surprised his rich secret out of his treacherous sleep?"

He indulged in another roar of laughter, and then, stooping low in the excavation so that only his bowed back was visible above the surface, appeared to be exerting his vast strength upon some heavy object at the bottom.

Val Venture and Tom Ringbolt touched elbows and then looked into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER V. FINDERS KEEPERS.

ARE you ready?"

That was the mutual query of that silent interchange of glance.

"Yes, and now!"

Such was the simultaneous response, though equally mute.

Each man, since the capture of the schooner, wore a brace of pistols in his belt, but neither thought of these as they swiftly bounded forward upon the bow-backed vulcan in his sand-pit.

He arose with a roar and a gnashing of teeth, and with the last of the unearthed treasure-chests in his herculean embrace.

But Ringbolt had already snatched up the pick and Val the spade.

A crushing blow from the flat of each upon the bristling head laid the monster senseless at the bottom of the hole, with the chest on top of him, before he could roar again or exactly comprehend the nature of his new and last interruption.

"Look at these poor dead comrades scattered around us!" cried Ringbolt, furiously. "Blast his infernal pictur'! best heave out the chest, and then cover him up out of sight, whether he croaks or not."

"By no means!" counseled the young commander, peremptorily. "He is our prisoner, but not necessarily our victim."

"What?"

And Ringbolt stared.

"In spite of the monster's brutishness," Val continued, "it is not for us to forget—especially as all this wealth is now our prize by right of conquest—that he, in all probability, killed these men, our unfortunate friends, in self-defense. Bear a hand now to getting out the chest from the hole. Then we can see to the securing of this monster and the treasure in bulk. Come, old fellow; no time is to be lost, if we are to make matters snug in the Spray Sprite before daybreak."

This sensible and humane counsel prevailed.

The chest was first got out with great difficulty. Then the senseless giant was disentombed, and, after being securely bound, hand, foot and limb, with the painter and chain cable of his own boat, was brought sputtering to his senses by a pailful of salt water being dashed violently upon his hands and face.

Caliban sneezed, licked the brine on his lips with a wry face, and then, forcing himself into a sitting-posture, glowered upon his captors in silence.

"That is well," commented Val. "Now let us see to getting the chests into the rascal's own boat, which we can afterward take in tow."

But this was easier said than done. Strive as they might, the united efforts of Val and Ringbolt, both of whom were more than ordinarily strong, could hardly so much as budge even one of the chests along the shingly beach, while, as for lifting it bodily, it was not to be thought of.

Caliban burst into a ferocious and contemptuous laugh.

"Babies! milksops!" he cried, in mingled mockery and chagrin; "what are ye who cannot sway by a hair-breadth the weights that I could take up to my bosom with these arms unbound! Oh, but it is a shame that I shall be one day avenged on the twain of ye!"

"Silence, monster!" retorted Val, indignantly. "If you are not hanged on shipboard for the murder of these poor men, our friends, it may not be because you do not get your deserts."

"Hang when and where you please, mite, mouse! The robbers would have stripped me of my rights, as you have done, and I killed them in fair fight. Caliban is not so fearful of death as was his messmate in Master Shakespeare's play, and this ye shall find."

"I have it!" said Ringbolt, drawing one of his pistols with an oath. "Captain Val, do you undo the twisted scoundrel's bonds while I cover him. He shall be our beast of burden in the matter of these stubborn chests, or I shall shoot him dead at the first mutter of refusal, and may the foul fiend welcome his accursed soul!"

"Do it, an' ye can and dare!" roared Caliban. "I shall not strain a muscle on your behalf. That I swear!"

"Wait!" cried Val, seizing the pick-axe afresh. "There is a better way out of our quandary, messmate. It is only wonderful we have not thought of it before."

With that he attacked one of the whole chests with such vigor as soon to burst the stout lid, and the money-bags forming the contents of the boxes were soon transferred to the boats, and the emptied receptacles tumbled after them for future use.

But the last to be reached in effecting this transfer were two bags from the box originally broken up by their first finder, and which have been mentioned as accidentally ripped open, to the exposure of their golden contents.

"Look, Captain Val," called out Ringbolt, taking a handful of the coins in his hands, and examining them in the moonlight with glistening eyes. "Doubloons and bright English guinea-pieces, by my faith! Come; life is short and the sea treacherous, at best. One bag for you, and t'other for me, pending the general division! What d'ye say?"

And, without waiting for an answer, he began distributing the coins among the various pockets of his clothing.

Val hesitated a moment, and then followed his example with the contents of the remaining money-bag.

Then, nothing further was in order than the transfer of their prisoner to between-thwarts, and, much to their satisfaction, this was unexpectedly effected through his own connivance.

"Oh, I cannot bear to be separated from the beautiful money!" cried Caliban. "Look you, my pair of insects! But relieve me of my bonds to the extent that I may move my lower limbs, and I will go with you willingly."

This was accordingly done, under due precautions against his possible treachery; but he proved as good as his promise, silently stepping into the boat, and taking his seat on top of the treasure-bags.

"We can attend to these poor fellows at our leisure," observed Venture, with a last look upon the dead men. "It shall be done, if possible, in the presence of their mourning kindred."

He then sprung after Ringbolt into the boat, and they pushed off, and forthwith began to round the island for the purpose of securing the other boats.

This was duly effected, and they made their reappearance at the Spray Sprite's side just as

the light of the new day was beginning to brighten and broaden ruddily in the mystic east.

The delighted astonishment of their fellow-adventurers over the return of their leader and second officer, with such a cargo, can better be imagined than described.

"Keep order there at the gunwale, Mr. Dunbar!" cried Ringbolt, forthwith beginning to hand the precious bags over the rail, while Captain Val clambered on board. "Bear a hand now, my hearties, to stowing the first prize of the Spray Sprite, privateer. There're probably be a thousand dollars in the pocket of every man Jack of you, with say a hundred thousand left for the fitting up of our skimmer of the seas."

At this instant, however, Caliban, fast-bound as were his arms, unexpectedly started up, with one of his bellowing roars.

Before he could be prevented, he had seized one of the treasure-sacks in his teeth, and plunged headlong into the sea, after which he at once disappeared.

Ringbolt uttered a furious oath, and there was temporary confusion everywhere.

"Be on the lookout for him when he reappears!" cried Venture, grasping a pistol to be in readiness. "That monster can swim like a fish in any plight, and he must not reach the shore to give the alarm to the Britishers!"

But, Caliban did not reappear, and at that moment Dunbar touched the young commander's arm.

"No danger of his giving the alarm, sir!" he said, smiling. "Look away!" pointing with his hand to the distant shore-line eastward.

Half a dozen specks were observable on the slowly-brightening expanse.

The boat-loads of sailors and marines were already returning from their shore raid, and doubtless altogether unsuspecting of the fate that had overtaken the ex-Virago in their absence.

It was an emergency to try the metal of the young commander, and nobly did he prove equal to it.

In twenty minutes, everything was in readiness on the schooner.

She was well under way, with her topsails bent to the gentle breeze, the men at their guns, the anchor over the bow, the British flag once more flaunting at the gaff.

Then they waited.

CHAPTER VI. FIRST BLOOD.

VERY fortunately for Valentine Venture, he was not without the best schooling for the privateering enterprise in which he was embarked.

In the course of his seafaring career, which may be said to have begun almost with his early childhood, he had seen service as a pressed hand on a British sloop-of-war to an extent that had familiarized him with the conduct of a fighting ship, while, by reason of several long voyages under a wise parent's tuition he had early become an experienced navigator, especially with vessels of the schooner build.

Indeed, vessels of this build and rig were at this period rapidly becoming popular throughout the maritime nations, and particularly so along the Atlantic seaboard. Scarcely more than sixty-five years had elapsed since their first introduction by Captain Andrew Robinson, of Gloucester, Mass.—in the year 1713, to be more particular. "Oh, how she scoons!" cried out an excited bystander when the initial schooner was launched off the stocks into the water. "A scooner let her be!" her inventor had instantly replied; the word "scoon" being popularly used in some parts of New England to denote the act of making stones skip along the surface of the water. And *scooners* or *schooners* have vessels of this sort been called from that day to this.

Added to this fortunate schooling of the young privateer captain for the emergency now at hand, was the fact that Ringbolt, Dunbar and several others of the men under his command had had similar man-o'-war's-men's experience; while, better yet, during the absence of Venture from the Spray Sprite, Dunbar and Maltby had selected from among the prisoners thirteen Yankee-born men, who had been pressed into the King's service, and were overjoyed to be now mustered among the patriots! All of these men were thorough-going man-o'-war's-men, whose acquisition was especially valuable at this initial stage of the enterprise.

The morning had brightened, and in a short time the boats from the shore were plainly made out with the naked eye.

They were advancing in procession, just as they had quitted the schooner on the preceding day, and the men in them seemed to be flushed and excited, as if from a recent success.

In the foremost boat Lord Rathspey could himself be presently distinguished, his brilliant uniform rendering him conspicuous among the hardy tars making up the craft's company.

In each of the succeeding boats was observed a commissioned officer, while the Jack Tars and marines seemed to be under some laxness of their customary discipline; or, in other words, the expedition seemed to have had a good time

generally, and this was in the light of a wind-up to their shore-sprees, in which pillage and marauding had constituted a conspicuous part of the fun.

At length Lord Rathspey was seen to stand up in his boat, and to view the maneuvers of the schooner in apparent bewilderment.

"My lord, the lieutenant is like enough puzzled, sir," said one of the Americans enlisted out of the surrendered crew, touching his tarpaulin to Captain Val. "The fact of our being under way must be something of an astonisher to him."

"We'll be likely to open his eyes yet wider in a short time," was the reply. "How are our guns?"

This man was a capable fellow named McIntosh, who had been created chief gunner on the spot, he having served perforce in that capacity under Rathspey's rule.

"All in readiness, sir," was the prompt response. "I can sink my lord's boat now with a shot from our bow gun, if your Honor says so."

"Wait a little."

But there was not a long wait.

The foremost boat was presently within hail; then Lord Rathspey thundered forth these indignant words, with an accompanying oath, through his hollowed hands:

"Virago, ahoy! What are you under way for?"

Captain Val waved his hand from the poop, and thundered back:

"For this reason, my lord!"

Simultaneously with this response, the British ensign was lowered and the rebel flag run up at the gaff in its place. There accompanied the act a rousing cheer from the schooner's new crew; and some drummers and fifers, who had been extemporized for the emergency, struck up with a rebel air that was just beginning to be popular among the Continentals.

Rathspey was seen to throw up his hands in impotent rage, and to shout out some command to his immediate followers and to those in the next boat behind.

As a consequence, the oarsmen bowed to their oars with renewed vigor, causing the crafts to approach rapidly, and the red-coated marines were observed to be getting their muskets in readiness.

"Now for that bow-chaser, Mr. McIntosh!" called out Captain Val, gayly. "Let us see what our Spray Sprite can do in the way of a maiden shot."

The gun was already in position. Bang! it spoke. The lieutenant's boat was knocked to pieces with the prettiest of shots, square in the bow, and her inmates were struggling in the water.

While a boat was putting off from the Spray Sprite to the rescue of the drowning men, a second shot, this time from the forward port gun, besides killing two men, knocked a round hole through the bottom of the next boat in order, which straightway began to fill.

The three remaining boats of the expedition, which were much further away, now took the alarm, and began to put back shoreward.

The schooner was instantly laid in pursuit, firing with her bow-chaser at intervals, with more or less effect.

In less than a half-hour the engagement was over, with the following result:

Of the Britishers, two boat-loads succeeded in regaining the shore in the vicinity of Saugatuck Point, whence they made their way into the interior, the majority of them to be made prisoners, one by one, by the Connecticut militia, while a few subsequently succeeded in reaching New York. The remaining boats were sunk, with a loss of five men by cannon-shot and drowning, and their inmates, including Lord Rathspey, their commander, and his subordinate commissioned officers, were picked up by the Spray Sprite's boats, as prisoners-of-war—fifty-two in number all told. There were no casualties whatever on the privateer.

Lord Rathspey's mortification had been indescribably increased on his recognizing, in the daring young commander of the victorious sailors and fishermen, the rival whom he knew he had most to fear in his suit for the hand of Mabel Ferris, for whom, it might as well be stated first as last, he cherished a passionate and honorable sentiment.

"Sir," said the Briton, with intense bitterness, when he could no longer escape the ceremony of yielding up his sword, "it is a profound humiliation for me to surrender my sword to a man who can only fight with a halter about his neck."

Strangely enough, these were almost identically the words used by the arrogant commander of the British frigate *Serapis* on the occasion of his surrender, under somewhat similar circumstances, to the immortal Paul Jones of Bon Homme Richard fame.

The response of the new-fledged privateersman—who was not without a vein of humor in his composition—to this insulting remark, was not unworthy of comparison with the American commodore's rejoinder on the more celebrated occasion:

"Sir," said he, "in accepting this disgraced cheese-knife at your august hands I regret that

it should have been wielded in an unjust and tyrannical cause. In continued courtesy, let me add, still more sea-water will be furnished should you particularly desire to soak your illustrious wig!"

The prisoners having been secured, and everything made snug again on the Spray Sprite, Captain Venture, accompanied by Ringbolt, took a boat for shore, in order to pay his good-bye visit to his mother.

The Widow Venture's cottage occupied the summit of a wooded rise on the east bank of Norwalk Bay, about one mile from the more pretentious homestead of Captain Hiram Ferris, and somewhat nearer to the village.

As the two men approached the place the widow herself—a remarkably beautiful and well-preserved lady of forty-five or thereabouts—came running out eagerly to meet them, with unusual distress in her manner.

It should be observed, in passing, that the engagement of the early morning had taken place several miles further along the Sound shore, so that the dwellers in the immediate vicinity of Norwalk Bay had as yet received but little or no intimation of its significance.

"Oh, Valentine! oh, Mr. Ringbolt!" exclaimed the pretty widow; "you are come at last, Heaven be praised for that! But, come right in! It may not be so bad as I feared, now that you are here. Your guaranty to work out the debt will be accepted by Captain Ferris—he said as much himself—and I need not be sold out at all. But come in where he and Mr. Gabo and the constable are in waiting."

Valentine looked at his mother like one thunderstruck.

"Sold out?" he repeated, bewilderedly. "Mother, have you taken leave of your senses?"

But Tom Ringbolt laid his hand on the young man's arm, with a knowing look, and together they followed Mistress Venture into the cottage, where an unexpected scene was in store for them.

CHAPTER VII.

A TRICKSTER FOILED.

At a table, covered with papers, in the best or "company" room of the dwelling, sat Captain Hiram Ferris, John Gabo, his steward, David Corpman, the chief lawyer, and Rand Johnson, exciseman and constable-in-ordinary of the provincial district.

Val Venture kept his patience in check while the situation was being explained to him, and which was just that which the reader will remember to have been foreshadowed by Captain Ferris's instructions to his steward on the preceding day.

Then, after looking over the mortgage deed claim which had been placed before him, his first impulse was to place his hand on his sword, which then for the first time his mother perceived he was wearing, together with the dagger and pistols in his belt.

"Heavens! my son, what would you do?" she exclaimed, laying her hand on his arm. "And, what is the meaning of this warlike display, Valentine? Tell me, then, you, Mr. Ringbolt—for I see that you, likewise, are armed. You have not enlisted quite yet, I hope, much as our sore-pressed patriot troops might need your stalwart arms. What has happened, I say?"

"One question at a time, mother, if you please," replied Val, slowly bridling his temper.

"What would I do, you ask? Well, nothing at present, perhaps, though it might be within the deserts of a certain flint-hearted, scoundrel-hypocrite that I could name," with a flashing glare at Ferris, and once more tapping his sword-hilt, "to receive chastisement at my hands. But let it pass. So, my mother, this hound would have turned you out of house and home on the strength of this document?"

"Softly, Master Valentine," interposed Ferris, composedly. "Your mother will bear me out that I would not have been thus uncompromisingly harsh with her."

"Oh, indeed!" with mock deference. "And what, good Master Skin-the-land, did you propose to her?"

"That, Sir Malapert," sternly, "which I may yet withhold, should you not keep a more civil tongue in your head! It was an offer that you should guarantee me in four pounds per month, out of your fishing industry hereabouts along the coast, until the entire indebtedness of one hundred pounds, with the accruing interest, might be liquidated. That was my magnanimous proposition, Valentine. And," with a virtuous air, "as I am a just and God-fearing man, I think it was no little Christian charity in me to concede that much out of my legal and inalienable dues in this pecuniary matter!"

Val burst into a scornful laugh.

"Oh, this is rich!" he exclaimed. "My friend," to Ringbolt, who was now examining the paper, "what do you make of the thing?"

"Seems to be ship-shape, by my poor reckoning," replied Ringbolt, refolding the paper and tossing it back upon the table. "Still, it's sextant-truth, my lad, that I'm a cable's-length out of the way, this being the first I ever knew of your father, Ralph Venture, having ever secretly contracted a hundred-pound obligation, secured or unsecured, with old Shark Astern over

yonder, and may the devil yet hook him with a piece of salt junk!"

Ferris glared, but vouchsafed no retort.

"What do you say, mother?" demanded Val. "Was this precious disclosure a piece of strange news to you?"

"Indeed, it was just that, my son!" replied the pretty widow, "though I do not, on that account, dispute the genuineness of Master Ferris's claim. Your dear father's was never a good business head, Valentine."

"I'll set this matter at rest," here struck in David Corpman, the lawyer, who had thus far, together with his companion the constable, manifested a sympathetic concern for the widow and her son. "The mortgage is flawless, and a matter of court-registry. Its existence has been known to me these years past, though I did not deem it ever Master Ferris's intention to declare it against the estate."

Rand Johnson gloomily nodded, in confirmation of his associate's words.

"There!" cried Ferris, half-boiling over at last. "What have you to say to my magnanimous offer now, sir?"

"Let us go temperately and slowly," suggested Val, beginning to smile. "In the mean time, don't forget that you're a God-fearer, captain, and I shall endeavor to remember that you are still Mabel Ferris's father—skinflint though you have proven yourself to be."

"I shall forget neither the one nor the other, sir!" cried the retired shipmaster, furiously. "But are you going to guarantee me in the gradual payments I agree to accept as a compromise on this claim of mine, or are you not?"

"Most decidedly—not!" was the quiet response.

"What!" in surprise, while the widow gave a startled look. "You then compel me to put an execution on the place here?"

"Most decidedly—not! What is the quit-claim in full, interest included?"

Ferris raised his brows ironically, and made a sign to his steward.

"One hundred and thirty-nine pounds, four shillings and sixpence to date," responded the Portuguese, reading off from a memorandum on which he had been rapidly figuring.

The widow clasped her hands; Ferris (with a covert glance of admiration at her comeliness) stretched out his legs, and patted the broad flaps of his sober-hued waistcoat sarcastically; the lawyer and exciseman looked uncomfortable; and Mr. Ringbolt softly chuckled to himself.

"One hundred and thirty-nine pounds, four-and-sixpence to date!" repeated Captain Val, complacently. "Are you sure that is all?"

Gabo nodded insolently, while Ferris called out, with increased offensiveness of manner:

"Payable in gold—'twas the solid coin Ralph Venture had of me—or its equivalent in our Continental script."

Val contemptuously produced a heavy pouch, and emptied its contents—a small deluge of bright gold guinea-pieces—upon the table.

"Count out the amount," he quietly remarked, "and turn over the remainder, together with the canceled claim-paper, to my mother!"

The old shipmaster had started to his feet in unqualified amazement, while the sensation was not less effective elsewhere.

"Shiver my timbers!" he ejaculated, his old sailor's nature cropping out through his sanctimoniousness in his excitement, and he seemed to size up the glittering pile at a glance. "Why, there be five hundred sovereigns of the realm in that heap, if there be forty shillings. God save you, young Master Venture! what have you been about—capturing a Spanish treasure-ship, or unearthing the blood-plant of Blackbeard, the pirate?"

At the last words John Gabo seemed to turn a shade yellower, and his eyes took on an anxious look.

Val waved his hand disdainfully.

"Pay yourself, as I command, and ask no questions, if you would be told no lies," he said, abruptly.

This was accordingly done, the widow looking considerably dazed as she sat with the still heavy pouch of gold in her lap, after Captain Ferris had conscientiously abstracted his dues from the moneyed mass.

"Now, listen to me, Captain Ferris," continued Val Venture, coldly. "I would recall the stipulation entered into between you and me yesterday forenoon with regard to my petition for the hand of your daughter, Mistress Mabel."

Ferris, still looking somewhat bewildered, nodded amiably, and rubbed his hands; while the others were all attention at once, with the single exception of old Ringbolt, who softly chuckled again.

"Master of my own ship and five hundred pounds in my locker," repeated the young man, slowly. "Those were the exact terms, I believe, on which you pledged yourself to grant me your consent to our marriage, I to have one year in which to fulfill the conditions thereof. Am I right?"

The shipmaster moved uneasily in his seat. Was it a dream, or reality, and what should he say? Tory at heart, and bent as he was on having a titled husband for his girl, could he still

afford to despise a somewhat humbler suitor who might have a young gold-mine in his boots? It was such a dilemma as he had never confronted before, and he had confronted many in his time.

"Yes, my son, yes!" he managed to mutter, a little stupidly. "You state the agreement pretty accurately, I believe."

"You believe? You passed your word upon it, Captain Hiram!"

"True, my son, true! Yes; that is the truth."

"Good!" triumphantly; "I now fulfill my part of the compact on the spot, and within twenty-four hours of its making. Here, sir!" throwing another heavy pouch upon the table, where it fell with a suggestive thud and clink combined. "This bag contains exactly five hundred guineas of my own—at least, they can be the rightful property of no other living man. Now, come here, that I may show you my ship!"

He threw open the cottage-door, and, as the wonderers flocked after him, strode out upon the house-lawn, whence, pointing with his hand, he indicated the matchless schooner at anchor in the bay, with the Continental ensign proudly fluttering from her gaff.

"That is the Virago!" stammered Ferris.

"Boy, what is the meaning of yonder ensign? Do you mean to say you have captured a king's ship?"

Val coolly nodded.

"She is no longer a king's ship," he responded, proudly. "She is henceforth the Spray Sprite, privateer, and I am her commander!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A BRIEF HOUR OF TRIUMPH.

At this juncture there was a sound of cheering close at hand, and, a moment later, a joyous mob of the Norwalk villagers, man and woman, young and old, made their appearance on the adjacent road.

The news of the daring capture of the schooner, together with the Rain's Island treasure-trove and the subsequent defeat and capture of the Danbury-raiding Britishers, was already running over the land like wildfire.

Both Rand Johnson and David Corpman joined heartily in the demonstrations of their fellow-townpeople, and even Ferris himself put on a smiling air for the concealment of his Tory sentiments, which might have been found a decidedly inconvenient possession at that time.

Captain Valentine and Ringbolt were instantly surrounded by the enthusiastic throng, as something far more than the mere lions of the passing hour.

Nothing would do but that they should relate the details of their adventure, and this they did as frankly as might be.

The Widow Venture's distress had, indeed, turned to an excess of great joyfulness, and she had reason enough to be proud of her gallant son on that eventful day.

"He is already rich," cried one of her gossips, "even with a share and share divide of the pirate's treasure among the fifty or more of 'em."

"And the Virago for his own privateer!" exclaimed another.

"He's named her the Spray Sprite now," corrected yet another. "And what a swash he will make on the high seas!"

"There'll be a vote of thanks from the Congress—perhaps a sword presentation!" cried a fourth. "Val is already famous, and what a catch for the girl he may fall in love with!"

"Pshaw! he's already netted. All the world knows he's Mabel Ferris's lover, and now the old man will be willing enough to ratify the match, gold-laced Lord Rathspey to the contrary notwithstanding."

Then, to crown the triumph, Mabel herself came running over to the scene, followed by nearly all the domestics, bond and free, on the Ferris estate.

Valentine took advantage of this occasion to have the young girl solemnly betrothed to him by her father before all those assembled.

This was done with sufficient secret unwillingness on the old man's part, though he could not but congratulate himself that the sober Presbyterian customs of the community were a bar to the off-hand celebration of the nuptials on the spot.

At last both Val and Ringbolt managed to tear themselves away from their friends, it being imperative that the Spray Sprite should show her silver heels to the narrow neck of Long Island Sound with as little delay as possible, if she would not have every line-of-battle ship in the British blockading squadron about her saucy ears.

There was a lingering good-by between mother and son, and then, half an hour later, the lovers were making their tender leave-takings in the identical spot that had witnessed their parting of the preceding day, while Ringbolt, this time in a well-manned boat, once more impatiently awaited his young commander at the bay-edge of the salt marshland.

"It seems almost too happy to be true," murmured the young girl at last. "But, tell me,

Valentine, when it is that we shall meet yet again."

"In less than a month from now," he replied, once more embracing her, "I shall return for thee, my beloved. Our bans will in the mean time have been published, and there will then be nothing left but for me to make thee mine own forever. Your father will scarcely dare to hinder us after what has passed."

"I think there can be no danger of that. His public word has been given."

"Tell me, how long did Rathspey stop over on the occasion of his visit yesterday?"

"But a fleeting space, during which I was careful to render myself invisible. He had to hurry away, in order to head the expedition, which your prowess turned into such unexpected disaster at the close. How proud I am of thee, Valentine!"

There was still another embrace.

"But he brought you a gift of some sort, did he not?"

"Yes, a box containing a rich Indian shawl and a Spanish fan. But, do not worry over that, Valentine. I did but glance at the gifts, at my father's insistence, with no vanity for possessing them; and they shall be coldly enough returned to their giver at the very first opportunity. Now there are many things of far greater moment that I am anxious to know of you, my beloved."

"You have but to speak, Mabel."

"What are your first movements after leaving me?"

"To take the Spray Sprite into the nearest secure port, as a matter of course, there to arrange for the turning over of our prisoners into the proper hands."

"Ah! their possession ought to compel some alleviation of the sufferings our unfortunate friends are undergoing in the British prisons, according to the reports. Is it not so?"

"I can only hope to that end, my beloved. But the authorities must decide as to the disposition of these prisoners of war—nearly a hundred in all."

"Well, directly after that, then?"

"I cannot tell as yet. I rather opine that we have our privateer superbly fitted and provisioned to our hands. The manning her to the full can but be the question of a few hours, on the heels of this brilliant enterprise, with as fine and brave a Yankee crew as ever trod deck or reeved a rope-yarn."

"Ah! and then?"

"Then hey for a dash into blue water!" The young man's eyes sparkled. "The Spray Sprite is a veritable sea-witch, Mabel. Before the Britishers seized her, up Gloucester-way, to make a fighting-ship of her, she was known everywhere as unrivaled—a skimmer of the waves, the pride of the seaboard. She can afford to laugh at the blockaders, in light wind or gale, and we ought to play havoc with the enemy's merchant fleet in, say, a fortnight's cruise, and not a hundred knots off-shore, either."

"And after that?"

"Can't you guess? Then I shall return for you, my beloved! Fear not that I shall not be able to fight my way to your side, even with half the Sound here swarming with their sloops and frigates. You shall be my bride, Mabel, and then—who can tell? France, perhaps—sunny and free France, for you, at least, until this cruel war is ended and our country's independence achieved!"

"No; that would not do for me. If I am, as we both so hope, to be a privateersman's bride, it shall be either at his side, or only here in my native land, to take my chances with the rest of my countrywomen, Valentine!"

"Spoken from a patriotic heart! So be it, then, my beloved! But this is a long way into the future, as history is made nowadays. What else would you ask about, Mabel?"

"The treasure, Valentine!"

"Ah, the pirate's treasure! Well, there'll be a thousand dollars per man, I think, share and share alike, for the Spray Sprite's crew. The rest shall be turned over to the Congress for the prosecution of the war. Ringbolt and I have about decided as to that."

"Caliban! what of that dreadful being, Valentine? Do you imagine he could have escaped drowning, after springing into the sea?"

Captain Val knitted his brows.

"I am afraid so," he replied. "But let that go, my beloved. Why intrude a nightmare into our dream of bliss?"

"Still—how could he have known of the existence of the treasure, Valentine?"

"Doubtless a secret of his father's, which he had managed to surprise in some way. You should have seen John Gabo's face when Ringbolt and I were relating our experiences! It is notorious that either he, or his Portuguese father before him, was associated with Blackbeard's cut-throats."

The interview had already lingered long, and it was now necessary that it should terminate.

"Good-by, and God be with you, Valentine, my betrothed!"

The sweet face was tearful as she turned to him for the last time.

"Angels guard you, Mabel!"

The parting was less sad, however, than on

the previous day, for now there was something more than a vague, unassured hope beyond.

This time Val was not interrupted on his way down to the shore, but Caliban had been a witness of the leave-taking, just the same.

The young privateersman had scarcely crossed the marsh and stepped into the boat in waiting, before the nondescript peered out after him from among the trees on the slope.

After that he sat himself upon a fallen oak, and for some moments watched the disappearing boat with sullen and revengeful eyes.

Caliban had managed to reach the shore, bound as he had been, and with the bag of gold between his teeth, though he had not yet made his appearance at Captain Ferris's house again, where his presence was tolerated on his useful father's account.

He was much better attired than on the first occasion of his introduction to the reader, when, indeed, his appearance was much that of a repulsive wild animal in the human form. He was now so decently clothed as to temper in no slight degree his native hideousness; there was no trace of the bitter hardship he had endured; and altogether there was a suggestion of prosperous cunning in the creature's general appearance.

The bag of gold, with which he had effected his escape, was a fat one, and Caliban was not a spendthrift.

Suddenly, as the boat was disappearing around the point, he sprang to his feet with one of his exasperating roars.

"Peste!" said a quiet but stern voice from close at hand. "Bellowing will do you no good, man. Better tell me all about it, and then we may devise something for the future."

Caliban turned to find himself confronted by his father, John Gabo.

CHAPTER IX. FATHER AND SON.

THERE was a strange affection existing between these two which would have to be studied in its manifestations to be thoroughly realized, if not understood.

Caliban, so fierce, brutish and monster-like to every one else, turned fawningly in the illumination of the rebuking but fond gaze that was bent upon him from the mysterious and secret eyes in John Gabo's head.

In his rough, surly way, though somewhat softened now, Caliban gave the details of his tragic experience on Ram's Island and what followed.

"How did you know of Blackbeard's treasure being buried there?" demand the Portuguese, when the tale was told.

"I knew it from you, father," was the response.

"From me?" in astonishment.

"Yes, in your sleep."

"Ah, I have been sleep-walking and sleep-talking again, eh?" with a troubled air.

"Yes, father."

"And you learned this secret of me in that way, my son?"

"In none other."

"How long ago was this?"

"More than a year, when you were recovering from the fever."

"In which you alone were found to nurse me back to life, Caliban!"

"I love where I love, as I hate where I hate, father."

"Your object in obtaining this treasure without my knowledge?"

"To lay it at your feet, father, that we might enjoy it in secret, and hate the whole world else at our pleasure. That," with the wolf-gleam kindling in his fierce eyes, "and something more!"

"What more?"

The creature hesitated.

"You have often told me, father, Master Shakespeare's strangely weird play-story of the Caliban, for whom you named me—the island monster—son of the witch Sycorax?"

"Thou sayest truly."

"Good! My Miranda is Mabel Ferris, and gold is powerful, father, especially with the old shipmaster, who is no Prospero."

"I understand. Still, you should have let the treasure lie. There, in the sea-sands, it was safe; now," with a gesture of mingled despair and resignation, "it is gone!"

Caliban reflected his sire's dejection by raising his knotted arms above his head and emitting a sort of dolorous howl; after which he was once more sullenly composed, as if there had been a species of relief in the fierce wail of his own voice.

"How," demanded Gabo, slowly, after a long pause, "came you to select last night, of all others, for unearthing the treasure?"

"I knew that Ringbolt and Val were among those that suspected Ram's Island as the plant-spot in a general way," replied Caliban, fiercely.

"I wished to be beforehand. All the rest—my interception, my defeat, my despoilment!—was a coincidence, an accursed fatality! They had taken their chances of my coming for the wealth. Aha!" gloatingly; "but did I not dispose of the four spies set to watch me? Thunder and lightning! they were but babies in the tem-

pest of my wrath, father. I crushed them like eggs; I smashed them into bloody dough; I might have torn them limb from limb!" working his huge fingers convulsively. "I would have done the like for the two others—curse them! curse them!—but for their catching me, shoulder-deep, in the pit, with the last of the chests in my arms. Oh!" And again he sunk down dejectedly on the rock.

"We can still hope, my son," said Gabo, cheerfully. "The girl is not yet Val Venture's wife; her father has no intention that she ever shall be; apart from that, we must conspire."

"But what is to prevent their marriage now, father? The old man so dearly loves gold, you know, and is not Valentine rich beyond measure?"

"No; beyond a generous division, the fools will give up a major part of the pirate's wealth to the patriot Government. This I know, and my master is no less wise than I. He is still bent on the Britisher lord for a son-in-law."

"But Rathspey is their prisoner, to say nothing of the young woman's love for the other."

"Love is nothing nowadays, Caliban; and, moreover, his lordship may be exchanged or effect his escape."

"Ha!"

"Think not, however, that I heed the gold-laced coxcomb. Your Miranda shall be yours, my Caliban, if cunning and desperation can effect it. Still, it were well if the fop were freed, in order to effect a diversion to Val Venture's disadvantage."

"Were he so freed, would that effect this needed diversion, father?"

"Without a doubt. The Britishers will soon be in temporary possession hereabouts. With Washington and his army of beaten discontents away in the Jerseys, and nothing but militia handfuls here and there along the Connecticut shore, an expedition from Sir Henry Clinton, in New York, can speedily sweep hitherways. That would leave Lord Rathspey ample time to press his suit. He is not likely to be intrusted with another ship in a hurry."

"So!" observed Caliban, knitting his hideous brows; "the gilded popinjay shall then be freed. I will see to that."

"How shall you accomplish it, my son?"

"Leave it all to me, and ask no questions, father. Thou knowest my inhuman prowess on land and wave. Good, then! Let me have your own shallop, the Seamew. I ask no more, and start on the track of this new-fangled privateer within an hour. The titled Englishman shall be rescued for our purpose."

"Have your way, Caliban. The little Seamew is at your disposal."

"Now, tell me, father. After we shall have succeeded in bringing the hopeful Britisher once more upon the scene, what are to be my ultimate chances with the girl?"

"Who can say, my son? We can only conspire and wait; that is all. With the vast treasure at our command, it might have been vastly different. But now—you know my poverty and my fidelity to my stewardship, my son. Besides Captain Ferris's trustfulness in my usefulness and probity, his remuneration of my services is meager. I have managed to save almost nothing."

Anomalous as it may appear, this was strictly true. As unprincipled and conscienceless as a rattlesnake in aught else, the Portuguese was incorruptibly true and honest in his employer's interests, save only as such might come to clash with the wishes of this strangely monstrous yet beloved son of his.

"You forget one thing, though, my father," interposed Caliban.

"What is that, my son?"

"The single treasure-bag that I escaped with in my teeth."

"Truly! Have you examined its contents yet?"

"Not yet."

"Doubtless one of the few that contained nothing but silver coin! That would be in harmony with our miserable luck through it all."

"Perhaps so; but I do not think, from the heft of the bag, that it contains silver, father."

"Ha!" eagerly. "More heavy, then, which would indicate gold coin?"

"No; but lighter than either silver or gold, in solid bulk, should be, methinks."

John Gabo, who had also been resting on the rock, sprang suddenly to his feet, his woodiness of aspect giving way to an unwonted animation.

"How sayest thou, Caliban?" he exclaimed, feverishly. "Lighter than gold or solid silver, and yet from among the other treasure-bags?"

"Yes, father?"

"Fortune may not have yet deserted us! Show me this bag at once. Where is it?"

"Come with me, father."

Leading the way, Caliban pushed a path straight along the foot of the hill among trees and undergrowth that might have baffled a less sturdy effort than his, Gabo following with difficulty.

The latter was in this way presently conducted to the interior of a large cave in the side of the hill, which gave evidences of an occasional occupancy on the part of the nondescript.

Here Caliban at once took from a cranny in the rocky wall the treasure-bag with which he had made his daring escape from his captors.

John Gabo, marking some cabalistic signs upon the bag, pounced upon it with an eager spring.

"See!" he cried; "we are rich! Caliban, my son, no wonder this weighed not so much as silver and gold in the mass—precious stones never do that. Fate is still with us! You blindly chanced in your frenzy upon one of the very few exceptionally valuable treasure-sacks of Blackbeard's hidden wealth—the accumulated spoils of long years of piracy upon the high seas. Behold!"

Thereupon, quickly drawing his clasp-knife, he ripped open the corded side of the crammed bag, to the disclosure of contents perfectly bewildering.

Tightly packed inside a regular layer of gold coins, themselves constituted a more than modest fortune in those days, there was a huge double-handful of superb diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and other precious stones—for the most part loose, but exquisitely cut—which came tumbling out like a rivulet of suddenly unimprisoned celestial fire upon the cavern floor.

Caliban uttered a sort of ecstatic roar, and then the two strangely isolated beings, father and son, clasped hands over the glittering heap.

"Hope returns!" exclaimed the former. "Power and wealth incalculable are still in our grasp, and the Puritan Miranda of this miserable and cold land shall yet be yours!"

An hour or two later, when the Spray Sprite was heading eastward down the Sound, like a gigantic and beautiful bird of snowy plumes outspread, and showing the white wake of her silvery heels to the narrower and more peril-fraught portion of that little land-locked sea, a boat, like a much smaller but scarcely less lovely bird, was hovering dancingly and hauntingly upon her track.

It was John Gabo's Seamew, a sharp-beaked, wide-winged shallop noted in those parts for her extraordinary sailing qualities, and the one figure crouching at her rudder was the nondescript Caliban Gabo, with his wolf-eyes fastened upon the object of his stealthy pursuit with a terrible and persistent gaze.

CHAPTER X.

IN GUILFORD HARBOR.

THE Spray Sprite put in at Guilford Harbor, then in the possession of a detachment of the Continentals under command of Colonel Meigs, who, under the instructions of his superior officer in that department, was then planning an expedition against Sag Harbor, Long Island, where the British had stationed a number of vessels and large quantities of military stores.

This was intended as an offset to the British successes which had taken place almost uninterruptedly in Western Connecticut, the vicinity of Manhattan Island, in New Jersey and elsewhere, to the consequent disheartening of the Patriot cause in a deplorable degree.

Indeed, the Americans were already in the midst of those gloomy, suffering days which were immortally characterized by Tom Paine as "the times that tried men's souls."

The new heart instilled by the tidings brought by the newly-fledged privateer to the garrison and inhabitants of Guilford can, therefore, be readily imagined.

"Sir, you are a simple hero, and the men under you in this scarcely credible success are likewise heroes!" exclaimed General Parsons, pressing Captain Venture's hand, with soldierly emotion, on the occasion of their first interview, when the particulars of the enterprise had been succinctly but modestly reported to him. "Why, I can scarcely realize this! The noise of it will go through the land like an electric thrill!"

"May it not be, general," said the young man, with becoming modesty, "that you somewhat overrate the importance of our exploit?"

"Zounds, man! no," was the response. "You are too modest by half! Overrate it! Gad! I should say not. A line-of-battle vessel and her full company in our possession at a single masterly stroke; the movement against Danbury nullified, to the extent that General Tryon's whilom success thereabouts last April can no longer be felt so sorely by us; this batch of prisoners, with Lord Rathspey among them; and, lastly, this enormous treasure-find, for the enrichment of our poverty-stricken national treasury! Good heavens! it is worth a decisive victory for our cause after a pitched battle with five thousand men on either side. The Congress shall recognize it as such. I promise you that. Captain Venture, I am proud of the honor of your acquaintance, and I predict for you a future scarcely second to that which our glorious sea-fighter, John Paul Jones, is already carving out for himself and his adopted country on the high seas!" And General Parsons once more grasped the young man by the hand, and insisted on his taking yet another glass of the wine that had been opened in his honor.

This interview took place in General Parsons's headquarters at the back of the village, and on

the evening of the day succeeding the capture of the Virago.

"Sir," said Captain Val, after a reflective pause, "it is but natural that I should feel profoundly flattered by the many kind things you see fit to say to me. In the name of my gallant associates, no less than my own, I thank you. But I am naturally anxious and suspenseful upon a number of points, which I beg, of your knowledge and courtesy, that you will explain."

"You have but to enumerate them, my dear captain," returned the general, genially. "I am all attention."

"I would first ask, then," continued Val, "if there is likely to be any objection made to the Sea Sprite going into commission forthwith as a letter-of-marque privateer, with myself in command and a crew of my own choosing?"

"Undoubtedly none!" was the hearty reply. "Let me see, you are already provisioned, you say?"

"Thoroughly, and for a long cruise. We have her ready-made-to-hand, so to speak."

"And how long shall you require to make up your full complement of men?"

"One week, I should say. We shall want a hundred and ten in all, and have already not quite half the number. But I must pick my men."

"Certainly. One week, eh? Well, that will give me ample time to receive your commission from the Congress, no less than its recognition of your services up to date. You will be quite safe in Guilford Harbor, into the bargain, for that period; and, while your recruiting is going on, you might take a hand with Colonel Meigs in this Sag Harbor expedition that is under way."

"Willingly. Now as to the treasure. I propose to make an even division of one thousand dollars' worth with each of my present ship's company, share and share alike, for the benefit of the men's families, before giving up the remainder for transmission to the Government by your hands."

"A modest enough proposition on your part, Captain Venture. We shall see to that business this very night, if you say so; and also to the transfer of your prisoners to our military custody here."

Captain Val rose in a very contented frame of mind.

He at once accompanied General Parsons, together with Colonel Meigs and several other Continental officers, on board the Spray Sprite. Some confusion was found to prevail there, however.

"We've lost our chief prisoner, sir," Tom Ringbolt explained, a little ruefully.

"What! not Lord Rathspey, I hope?" cried Captain Val.

"That very same, sir."

It was shown how the British lieutenant had disappeared through one of the ports opening out from the compartment in which all the prisoners had been confined together, without discrimination of rank.

The dead body of the sailor who had been on guard at this particular port was lying where he had fallen, covered with many and unnecessary wounds.

"Caliban's work!" exclaimed Captain Valentine. "His lordship was ably assisted in his escape."

It was not yet quite dark when the party returned to the main-deck, and, as they did so, a distant and mocking hail came to them on the breeze from the direction of the harbor's mouth.

Val seized a night-glass, and brought it to bear on a dimly-outlined, swiftly-moving object in that quarter.

"Pursuit would be useless!" he exclaimed, after a brief inspection. "Caliban is off with our prize lieutenant in John Gabo's little Seamew! The shallop can outsail anything on Long Island Sound in this light wind."

The disappointment was keen, but had to be borne.

The remaining prisoners were forthwith turned over to the military authorities.

Later on, the pirate treasure was reckoned up, and, after the division already suggested had been made, was placed in General Parsons's charge for remission to the Government.

All told, it had consisted of coin and other valuables, to the value, at a rough estimate, of twelve hundred thousand dollars; so that the reader can judge of the vast and timely funds that were thus placed at the disposition of the depleted national treasury by the enterprise of Captain Venture and his associates.

Toward midnight, when Captain Venture was meditatively pacing the quarter-deck, the army men having returned to the shore, and everything on board snug and quiet, Tom Ringbolt stepped over the rail from a brief leave of absence.

"Captain Val," said he, "I have taken it upon myself to do a little private stroke of business for you and me in the future."

"What have you done?" demanded the young commander.

"As we privately sized up the treasure-sacks, sir, if you will remember, there were forty-four

of 'em, arter Caliban had got away with one in his teeth."

"I do remember."

"Well, two of 'em was comparatively lightweight, as if containing precious stones, no less than coin, sir."

"What of that?"

"Not much; only I've just buried away one of the two. That is all."

"Buried it?" cried the young captain, aghast.

"What for?"

"Ag'in' the chance of you and me going dead-broke at the end of the war!"

"This is scandalous!" exclaimed Val, furious.

"It is unfair alike to the Government and our associates."

"Charity begins at home, sir. You'll find out where that one bag is stowed away when I choose to tell you, and that won't be before the end of the war."

It was the first and last piece of insubordination on the old salt's part; but he had his way and kept his word.

CHAPTER XI. BLUE WATER.

LEAVING Ringbolt and Dunbar to use their own judgment in recruiting for the ship's company, Captain Valentine at once entered, heart and soul, into the expeditions that were preparing against the British from the eastern end of Connecticut.

He was made temporarily second in command to Colonel Meigs, and started with the movement against Sag Harbor on the second day following the arrival of the Spray Sprite in Guilford Bay.

It was eminently successful. Large quantities of British military stores were destroyed, together with twelve of their vessels. The enemy were also made to sustain a loss of ninety-six men, of whom six were killed and the remainder made prisoners; the Americans returning to Guilford without the loss of a man.

He also distinguished himself in the celebrated exploit, a little later on, of Colonel Barton's, when that officer, with forty volunteers, passed over by night from Warwick Neck to Rhode Island, and succeeded in surprising the British general, Prescott, in his bed, and, without giving him time to dress himself, hurried him away to Providence, together with one of his aides-de-camp.

This event, so mortifying to General Prescott and to the royal army, occasioned a corresponding amount of exultation among the Americans.

Finally, there came the glorious day when the Spray Sprite weighed anchor for her initial dash into blue water under regular authorization as a privateer!

Captain Venture paced the deck in an enviable frame of mind, and with his commission in his pocket.

The recognition of his services had by this time become general throughout the seaboard; military salutes were thundered from the shore; and at last, on a bright July morning, which seemed auspicious of a fortunate cruise, the gallant schooner slipped out of Guilford Harbor, with a farewell shot from her stern-chaser, and a rousing cheer from her picked crew.

With a spanking breeze on her starboard quarter, Gull and Fisher's Islands were passed, and Block Island was just in sight when one of the British blockading fleet, a large and swift frigate, gave chase from off Montauk.

"Take in the foretopsail, Mr. Ringbolt," suggested Captain Valentine, after studying the stranger through his glass for a moment. "It won't do any harm for the big fellow to have a nearer view of us."

The order was given, and, while the schooner slowed up on her course, the frigate came sweeping down on the wind, with every stitch drawing from main-yards to royals.

She presented a formidable and magnificent spectacle, and, as she drew nearer, her decks seemed swarming with men, while the attitudes of the brilliantly-uniformed officers could be distinguished crowding her poop-deck.

At last the Spray Sprite threw out her topsail afresh, and, as she began to increase in speed, a well-directed shot from her stern-chaser sent the splinters flying from the frigate's bows.

The enemy yawed, and gave an entire broadside in return, but there wasn't a shot but fell short, and then the schooner began to leave her so rapidly that the chase was presently abandoned.

A thrill of joyful pride pervaded the breast of the young privateersman.

He might, indeed, be fighting with a halter about his neck, but wasn't this worth the risk—the exhilarating joy of commanding such a ship and such a crew?

Block Island was hull-down by sunset of that first day, and then the world of blue water was all before them where to choose!

"We need give ourselves no further anxiety about the blockaders," Captain Val said to Ringbolt, an hour or two later, when he was preparing to turn in. "But we must keep our eyes peeled for prizes."

"Mine will be peeled, sir, while yours are shut up in the sleep you so much deserve," was the first mate's response as he quitted the cabin for his watch on deck.

"Sail ho!" sung the lookout, only two hours later.

Captain Venture was notified, and was speedily on deck.

It was a gloriously moonlight night, with a fresh breeze—a schooner breeze, or just the sort that the Spray Sprite was most likely to excel in—from the northwest ruffling the bosom of the deep.

"What do you make?" he demanded of Dunbar, who was sighting with his telescope over the starboard rail.

"Nothing but specks, so far; but sails without question," was the response.

Then Val brought his own glass to bear, and with better luck, probably because of his more youthful eyesight.

"There are three of them," he said, after a long pause. "We must see what they amount to."

The schooner's course was laid accordingly, and, as the chase would doubtless be a long one, the young captain retired to his cabin to finish out his sleep.

When he reappeared on deck, at the first gray of the coming dawn, the sails, three in number, were less than ten miles away to the southward, and it was gratifyingly evident that the Spray Sprite was steadily overhauling them, hand over hand.

Valentine's face brightened.

"Transports, eh?" he queried of Ringbolt, who was now in charge of the watch.

The old sailor nodded, and then leveled his glass.

"Two of 'em are, without a doubt, sir," was his verdict. "But the third is, like enough, a gunboat as convoy. I've been looking 'em over this long time."

This judgment proved correct.

As the morning brightened, it was presently perceived, beyond reasonable doubt, that the vessels in sight were evidently two large transports under the convoy of an armed brig, the latter of somewhat superior tonnage to the Spray Sprite.

The privateer captain rubbed his hands, his bold black eyes fairly dancing in his head.

"Pipe all hands to quarters, Mr. Maltby!" he called out to the boatswain. "If this wind holds, we ought to be within gun-shot in less than an hour."

While this was being done, and all hands were tumbling up from below, the second mate, old Silas Dunbar, who had just re-appeared on deck, took a long look ahead, and then turned to the young skipper, with a touch of the hat.

"That brig's a ten-gunner, sir, and half again our size, though a slow sailer," he observed.

"I agree with you, Mr. Dunbar," was the smiling response.

"And them transports, too, are likely to have fighting crews and some guns, sir."

"Quite correct, I fancy, Mr. Dunbar."

"But—you'll permit plain speaking, sir?"

"Why not? What is it, my friend?"

"Surely you don't mean to tackle the three of 'em, sir?"

"Of course, I do! What are we here for, man, if it isn't to fight? I expect not only to tackle those three ships, but to bag them, my old friend!"

Ringbolt chuckled, and forthwith reported this intention to the crew, who received it with a ringing cheer, while Dunbar shrugged his shoulders, and ventured upon no further protest.

The brig presently heaved to, while her transports, which were close together, and about two miles further south, continued to crack on all speed.

"That fellow is showing his teeth," observed the captain, smiling.

"And he's just about to bark, too!" murmured Ringbolt, pointing. "Look out for his broadside."

Scarcely had he spoken before a sheet of smoke and flame broke from the five open ports on the stranger's starboard side.

Then came the simultaneous crash of his broadside guns, the iron hail from which hissed in unpleasant proximity to the schooner, one of the balls making a round hole through her main-sail.

But the Spray Sprite at once paid off several points, so as to increase the interval, and bring her redoubtable brass stern-gun to bear.

This was done with great ease and rapidity, though not before there was a second broadside from the brig, which splintered one of the schooner's cat-heads, and killed a man out of a group about the capstan.

But a fortunate choice had been hit upon in naming McIntosh chief gunner of the Spray Sprite.

Almost at the same instant her Long Tom, aimed with his own eye and hand, belched forth her thirty-two-pound round shot, and the brig was seen to be pinked just above the water-line!

"That's the talk!" shouted Captain Venture. "Stick to her water-works, Mac!"

This was done, as the privateer continued to pay off, the next shot from the stern-chaser taking effect so close to the sea-line of the brig's starboard bow that the water could be plainly seen, through the glass, pouring into the gap.

The brig, conscious of her superior artillery, would gladly have come to a closer acquaintance on the spot; but this the wily Spray Sprite would not have, as yet.

Incomparably the better sailer, she now managed to circle around her enemy just out of reach of his twenty-four-pounder broadsides, while every now and then getting in a fresh pill with her terrible Long Tom.

Hardly a shot from this gun, under McIntosh's sterling management, failed to tell in just the right place; and finally, when the action had lasted a little more than an hour, the brig was seen to be lurching steadily to starboard, besides manifesting other signs of distress.

"Run my capstan, if she ain't sinking!" cried Ringbolt, with something yet stronger in the way of an oath.

This was now self-evident.

Captain Venture gave the necessary orders, and the Spray Sprite, answering beautifully to her helm, began to round in upon the stranger, broadside in readiness.

At last, when within hail of the brig, the latter was seen to have heeled over so much to starboard as to present a complete view of her main-deck in the slant, and to render her broadsides useless.

"What ship are you?" shouted Captain Val, through his speaking-trumpet.

"The British brig-of-war Bulldog!" was hoarsely trumpeted in response. "What ship are you?"

"The Yankee privateer Spray Sprite!" in return. "Do you surrender?"

"What! to a rebel pirate! See you in Tophet first!"

"You'll be more likely to see us nearer, my bold Britisher!" commented Val, taking the trumpet from his mouth. "Let go with that broadside, Mr. McIntosh, and all hands in readiness for boarding!"

The vessels were now not more than twenty rods apart.

Crash went the two twenty-four-pounders of the schooner's starboard broadside, point-blank, right into the brig's deck; and then, before the smoke had drifted away, the Long Tom was again in play from the Sea Sprite's stern, with tremendous effect at the short range.

"Hold on!" the brig's commander was heard to bellow through the smoke, with a sailor-like oath. "We're sinking!"

"Have you struck?"

"Yes; and be hanged to you!"

CHAPTER XII.

A RATTLING CRUISE.

THE capture of the brig Bulldog included a ship's company of seventy-six men, officers and crew—four of whom had been killed in the engagement—together with two thousand pounds in specie, with which she had been on her way to pay off one of the frigates then blockading the port off Charleston, whither the transports under convoy were also bound.

This was all; the transfer of the prisoners and money-chests to the victorious privateer having been hardly effected before the ill-starred brig sunk forever beneath the waves.

The sole loss sustained by the Spray Sprite was by the death of the single man, as already mentioned.

The prisoners having been duly secured, sail was at once cracked on in pursuit of the transports, whose sails were by this time the merest specks upon the southern sea-line.

The larger of the fugitives—a fine barque and very rapid sailer, with three hundred red-coats on board for the Chesapeake—unfortunately for the privateersman, succeeded in making her escape.

Her companion, however, was overhauled and captured, without the firing of a gun, by sundown.

She proved to be British transport Dolphin, a full-rigged ship of five hundred tons, with three officers and eleven men, the smallest number that could sail her with safety, and heavily laden with military stores from Sir Henry Clinton's depot of supplies at New York, intended for the British troops in the neighborhood of Baltimore.

Six of the crew of the Dolphin and nine of those made prisoners from the brig-of-war proved to be American seamen, victims of the British press-system in England and on the high seas, who rejoicingly availed themselves of the opportunity to sign the privateer's papers, and serve thereafter the beloved flag of their struggling native land.

All the prisoners remaining were then transferred to the Dolphin; such stores were appropriated as the Spray Sprite was in need of; and then, with a strong prize-crew under a trustworthy commander, this maiden prize of the bold privateer was dispatched for whatever French port she would be most likely to make her way into through the British blockade that

was then being kept up, with more or less success, along the Gallic coast.

The remainder of the Spray Sprite's brief initial cruise was what, in the nautical parlance of the time, was termed a "rattler."

Nine more prizes were added to her list in the course of the following fortnight. Most of them were comparatively insignificant, to be sure, but two stanch vessels out of the number were safely entered into the port of Providence, with considerable stores aboard, and four of the remainder, not being considered worthy of a prize-crew, or a voyage to the other side of the Atlantic, were given to the flames.

All these captures were made along the New Jersey Coast, within less than a hundred miles of shore, and by a later capture, that of a small transport, made while the Spray Sprite was reconnoitering with a view of reëntering Long Island Sound, it was learned, with a vast degree of satisfaction, that the success of the privateer had already struck terror into the hearts of the British all along that part of the coast, while inspiring the patriots in a corresponding degree.

Even the wind-up of the cruise, which Captain Venture was rather desirous of rendering inconspicuous, that he might then privately retire for refitting into one of the Sound ports, and thus have an opportunity for revisiting Norwalk, in the consummation of his agreement with Mabel Ferris, was destined to be brilliant.

For, being close pressed by a large blockading frigate in the vicinity of Martha's Vineyard, a particularly lucky shot from the schooner's stern-chaser brought the enemy's foremast overboard in a vast and fluttering heap of wreckage; and, before the casualty could be repaired, the privateer made good her escape, gliding into the Sound, without further detention, by daybreak of the ensuing day.

Having learned that New London was still in the hands of the Americans, sail was at once made for that port, which was entered without mishap on the same day.

The fame of the Spray Sprite's success had preceded her, and when it was known that she was safely in port, after her brief but brilliant cruise, the wildest enthusiasm prevailed among the garrison and townspeople.

But Val was too anxious to inform himself as to the affairs in the vicinity of Norwalk to care greatly for the ovations in his honor.

Leaving Ringbolt and Dunbar in charge of the schooner, he seized the first opportunity of having an interview with General Parsons, whose headquarters, he learned with much satisfaction, had been temporarily changed to this place.

"What is the situation at Norwalk, sir?" he eagerly demanded, when the general's congratulations had been becomingly acknowledged.

"The British are having pretty much their own way thereabouts, though I do not think the village is actually occupied, as yet," was the reply. "However, they have troops at Greenwich and Bridgeport, so that Lord Rathspey may be said to have the coast-line west of here more or less under his control."

"Lord Rathspey!" repeated the privateersman.

"The same, my dear captain."

"He has been reinstated, then, in spite of his surrender of the Virago?"

"Oh, yes! though altogether with shore responsibility, it is said. An able man, that Rathspey, from what I can hear! It is said that he will shortly return to England, with a rich old Tory in those parts, Ferris by name, whose daughter he is to marry, though of what truth and what gossip this may consist I— But excuse me, Captain Venture, are you ill?"

"No; a passing dizziness, that is all," and Val, who had turned suddenly white, accepted the glass of wine that was hurriedly offered him, after which he seemed to regain his composure.

"How are the enemy in a navy line thereabouts?" he asked, abruptly. "Would it be imprudent to venture a dash among them with the Spray Sprite?"

"Imprudent? It would be madness!"

"Why?"

"The British gunboats, and even larger vessels, are passing to and fro between those points and New York Harbor, off and on, almost constantly."

"Ah!" musingly. "And how do they manage with the dangerous Hell's Gate, I wonder?"

"They doubtless find pilots enough even to obviate that difficulty, though we have news occasionally of some one of their smaller vessels getting wrecked on the rocks thereabouts."

"I used to be thought something of a Hell's Gate pilot myself," continued the young man, half as if communicating with himself. "Many was the load of fish and lobsters that Ringbolt and I carried to New York by that pass in the old Osprey."

General Parsons caught at the name.

"Indeed!" he said. "Quite different that from privateering, eh, captain? The Osprey, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Odd! There was a fisherman here this morning desiring to hire his chance services to

me in a smack of that name. Swore she was both stanch and fleet."

"What was the man's name, general, if you please?"

"Holcomb."

Val Venture smote his knee, and was possessed of a sudden idea.

"The very man to whom I leased my smack!" he exclaimed. "And he wasn't out of the way as to the craft's qualities, either. A better of her class than the old Osprey doesn't cut salt-water between Throgg's Neck and Point Judith! Did you engage Holcomb, general?"

"Not yet."

"I may have occasion to do so on a private venture, if you have no objection."

"None whatever, captain. You will probably find him hanging about the river somewhere."

CHAPTER XIII.

A PERILOUS ENTERPRISE.

VAL VENTURE remained with the American commandant a little longer, receiving general information as to the general condition of American army affairs, which were in a somewhat more hopeful state than prior to his setting out upon his cruise, and then hastily took his leave.

He was so fortunate as to encounter the man he was next most desirous of seeing, Holcomb himself, at the water's edge, a few minutes later.

Fisherman Holcomb, a hardy and honest old sailor, was no less rejoiced at meeting the young man, whom he greeted with a vast amount of increased respectfulness.

"Ah, Captain Val!" he exclaimed, as they clasped hands; "but you are making fame and fortune fast, my lad. I could scarcely realize it awhile ago, as I stood on the dock yonder, running over your trim privateer with my eye, as she lies at anchor out there in the bay, to think that you are just back as her commander. By jingo! Paul Jones himself never made such a start of it, and I doubt not you will be as famous as he ere long."

"General Parsons informs me," said the young man, a little abruptly, when he had tolerated the old man's praises as long as he could, "you are desirous of hiring out your services with the Osprey?"

"Yes, sir; there seems to be little or no money to sell my fish for, and I must manage to pick up a living somehow."

"You have a lad to assist you, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wish to engage you and the craft for one week from this hour, if you say so, at your own price."

"It's a bargain!" cried the old fisherman, joyfully.

Holcomb was a Norwalk man, and Captain Val remained a little longer with him, to effect an enlargement of his information as to the state of affairs in Captain Ferris's and his mother's neighborhood, and then, after making an appointment for an hour hence, hurried on board the Spray Sprite.

It was now nightfall.

"Ringbolt, I must have a word with Mabel Ferris and my mother to-night," Captain Val peremptorily announced, after explaining what he had learned of the situation to his old messmate. "Are you with me?"

For answer, the old salt simply extended his hand, which the young commander grasped with fervor.

"Now as to how we stand," said Ringbolt. "What is your plan?"

"In the first place, let me understand this: I think we are sure of Dunbar by this time, eh?"

"No better or truer man ever drew salt air into his lungs!" was Ringbolt's comment. "If he's apt to err at all, it's on the side of over-caution—a good fault at times; but he's springy as hickory and true as steel."

"Good! I agree with you. This, then, is my plan: The Spray Sprite, under Dunbar's directions, shall follow us to Norwalk Bay within twenty-four hours, in disguise."

"In disguise?"

"Why, yes! She can be made to look like an innocent-appearing British transport in less than no time. And there are enough British Jack Tar rigs among the captured stores remaining in her hold—ay, and British red-coats, too, for that matter—to trick off every man jack of her in harmony with the schooner's false colors, if necessary."

"Hold on! Let me turn that over in my thinking-box, Cap. Risky that, but it ought to work!"

"Of course it ought!" cried Val; "and all the better with the discreet Dunbar in command. Why, she might lie for days at the harbor-mouth without being questioned, and in readiness for any enterprise we may be forced to undertake."

"All aboard for the false colors, my hearty! It'll go; or, if it doesn't, the Spray Sprite will—to the devil!"

Captain Val laughed.

"The die is cast, then!" he said.

"Might I ax a few questions, sir, as to home affairs?"

"All you want."
 "You say the old shipmaster is about to slip his cable for King George's island?"
 "Yes."
 "With the pinnace-yacht, Miss Bright Eyes, a-tow?"
 "Yes, if I don't hinder—and be hanged to him for a double-faced, perjured and hypocritical hound!"
 "And under the pennant of Lord Rathspey's convoy?"
 "Such is the talk."
 "But he has no ship-command at present."
 "He can get one when he wants, I fancy."
 "And they will first go to New York in Master Ferris's ship, by the Hell's Gate?"
 "So Holcomb has been given to understand."
 "But Master Ferris has no ship."
 "He can easily have bought one. There's enough of 'em for sale nowadays, and the old man is rich."
 "Still, I can't understand one thing."
 "What is that?"
 "What John Gabo and Caliban may be about in the mean time."
 "Oho!"

"You see, Captain Val, that Caliban is no fool; and, to say nothing of his having got away with that treasure-bag, he loves the young lady."
 "That monster!"
 "But he is more than that. He is shrewd, able, and in love with the pinnace-yacht."
 "Well, we must wait and see for ourselves."
 "But suppose they shall have already started for the Gate?"
 "The time is fixed for the day after to-morrow. Holcomb is positive as to that."
 "And what then?"
 "You mean, if they succeed in getting off with the young lady?"
 "Yes."
 "By Heaven! I shall follow on in the Spray Sprite, if it costs me a brush with every frigate in New York Harbor."
 "That's the talk! but—"
 "Well, what else?"
 "If she might be already spliced to Rathspey?"

"It is not to be thought of!" exclaimed the young adventurer, passionately. "Her father may have bullied her into consenting to quit the country for England with him, but to being false to her troth—never!"

Ringbolt bowed his head and said no more. Dunbar was forthwith taken into their counsels, and his part in the programme explained to him.

He not only thought it feasible, but was eager to undertake it.

Leaving him with the necessary authority, Captain Val hurried away with Ringbolt to keep his appointment with Holcomb.

Half an hour later they were scudding up the Sound in the Osprey before a light but favoring wind.

"It's old times over again, Captain Val," said Holcomb, "to see you there at the Osprey's tiller."

Val made some answer, and, with the old familiar helm under the control of his strong young hand, remained buried in silent thought. Certainly, there was enough to occupy his troubled meditations.

Daring and fearless as he was, by name and nature, none could recognize better than he the peril of the enterprise he was now embarked on.

In the first place, he knew that his neck was now the forfeit, in the event of his capture.

It was short shrift and a shorter rope in those days for any American privateersman that chanced into British hands. Not only did he fight, as Rathspey had tauntingly charged, but move and live hourly, as well, with a halter about his neck.

And then Mabel's apparent spiritlessness, not to say complacency, in all this that was come to his knowledge!

True, he had not been able to return for her quite so soon as he had promised and hoped. But her fidelity to him he could not doubt; and, moreover, the fame which he must have already acquired, with the story of the Spray Sprite's havoc and exploits noising like a trumpet along the seaboard, was such as might well have compensated for the delay in the young girl's patriotic heart and imagination.

However, he could only wait and see, plot and plan.

The Osprey was a fine sailer, and Norwalk Bay was reached two good hours before the dawn.

Resolving to interview his mother first, Captain Val, accompanied by the faithful Ringbolt, made his landing at the marsh-edge, and was soon at the top of the wooded rise on which the Widow Venture's cottage was situated.

CHAPTER XIV.

WIDOW AND SON.

THE greatest caution was exercised at the start, though there were no signs as yet of either village or harbor being regularly occupied by the British, and the cottage stood silently and restfully under the stars.

A knock at the door presently brought Mistress Venture to one of the upper windows.

"What, my son!" she exclaimed, as soon as Val had made his presence known; "is it you?"

"Yes, my dear mother; and your old friend Mr. Ringbolt, too."

"I shall be down at once. But be very guarded; there seem to be spies everywhere of late."

A moment later she was in her son's embrace, with a disengaged hand at Ringbolt's disposal.

About the one lingering sentiment of romance in the old salt's nature was a secret and passionate worship of Val Venture's comely mother.

She had conducted them into her best room with much show of anxiety.

"We cannot be too careful," she explained, a little later on, when the fervor of the unexpected meeting had somewhat subsided. "The red-coats are everywhere, and spies are plenty."

"Spies upon your house, mother!" exclaimed Val, incredulously.

"Indeed, yes, my dear. I have hardly ventured abroad anywhere for the past fortnight without having signs that I was being watched."

"But what have you done that they should spy upon you?"

"Nothing; but you have."

"Ah! I begin to understand."

"Oh, dear! Why, there is a price upon your head—one hundred pounds!—and has been ever since your capture of the Virago."

Val laughed.

"There is no Virago any more, my dear mother; only the Spray Sprite."

"As if I and all the world did not know! But you have left your gallant vessel to go to France without you, then?"

"To France!"

"Yes; isn't the Spray Sprite gone to France, my son, or on her voyage thither?"

"By no means, my dear mother."

"That is the general impression with everybody."

Ringbolt gave one of his chuckles.

"And a mighty good impression," he commented, "to be kept afloat! Eh, Val?"

Val nodded.

"Truly, the longer they think that the better," he said. "But why, then, should you be spied upon on my account?"

"While it is the general belief that your dreaded privateer is gone across seas for refitting, you, my son, are not thought to have gone with her. Lord Rathspey is, I think, in a constant terror of your return."

"Now as to all this, mother: what does it mean? Is Mabel false to me?"

"She? not so, my son. You ought to know better than that. She consents to go with her father to England; that is all."

"But under Lord Rathspey's convoy?"

"Yes; but how could she help that? She simply will not desert her father's fortunes; and if Lord Rathspey chooses to argue in his own favor from that, it is no fault of the poor girl's."

"Then there is no engagement between them?"

"No; nor ever will be while you are alive. Trust her for that."

"Still, she was pledged to me."

"Ay; and the bans would have been published—after which Captain Hiram could not in decency have refused to stand by them—but for Lord Rathspey's unexpected return on the day following your departure."

"So!"

"Yes; and directly after that the British came into possession all along hereabouts. Then Captain Hiram refused to have your bans published, in spite of what his daughter or I could say, and Lord Rathspey, who is now in command of the red-coats in this section, has been a virtual inmate of the old captain's household ever since."

"Captain Hiram is an infernal Tory hypocrite and scoundrel!" exclaimed Val, indignantly.

"He is a hard, selfish man, my son."

"But his dishonesty! he was never that before. To go back on his pledged word to me in this way—a man whose word, hard and selfish as he may be, has heretofore been thought as good as his bond!"

Here the pretty widow, much to the surprise of her visitors, fell to shedding tears.

"You weep, my mother!" exclaimed Val, while Mr. Ringbolt began to manifest uneasiness. "Why do you weep?"

"Oh, my son!" and the widow dried her tears, though still distressed; "you do not know all."

"Perhaps not; but that is just what I want to know."

The pretty widow lowered her eyes, and tightly clasped her hands in her lap.

"She's handsome enough to eat," said Mr. Ringbolt to himself, while clearing his throat, and with his eyes covertly devouring the pretty face and buxom figure. "Spike my guns! she'd be plum-duff and lobsouse for a Lord Admiral every day in the week, with Sundays thrown in!"

"Dear Val," half-whispered Mistress Venture, "you must forgive your old mother!"

"Old! you old!" the old salt burst forth, in spite of himself. "By jingo! what are violets, then, and lambs and spring-chickens?"

And then he subsided in no little confusion, as she threw him a glance of pretended wonder.

"But do explain yourself, mother," cried Val. "What on earth have I to forgive you for?"

"Val, I—I am afraid it has been my fault!"

"What has?"

"Captain Hiram's breaking his word with you—his determination to go to England with Mabel."

"But how can you be responsible for that?"

"Val, I may have told you—Mr. Ringbolt won't think me strange, I hope?" with an appealing glance in that quarter.

"No more nor a bird o' Paradise or a humming-bird with a red head!" interposed the old sailor, quite reassuringly.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Ringbolt! you are so considerate.—I may have told you, Val, some time, you know, that—that Captain Hiram wanted to—to marry me before your dear father was my accepted lover?"

"I rather think you are telling me that now for the first time, my dear mother," replied the young privateersman, good-humoredly. "But it doesn't matter, since you are still pretty enough for that to have been the case."

"Trim as a flying-fish an' bright as a rainbow!" was Ringbolt's internal comment. "There ain't no eyes in a woman's head like black ones for steady chain-lightning!"

"Well, it was the case, my son," and the widow's pretty confusion returned. "But that isn't all. Captain Hiram has kept on loving me ever since, you know; or, at least, he swears he has."

"Loving you ever since!" repeated Val, a little bewilderedly; for he was not overshrewd in womankind outside of his personal feelings. "But what are you driving at, mother?"

"Oh, can't you understand anything, my son? He wants to marry me now. He prayed me to have him more than a fortnight ago, and, if I had only consented, he wouldn't have broken with you as he has done, or be now getting ready for England. There, now!"

"The unconscionable old fool!" cried the young man, indignantly.

"Blast his bleary binnacle light!" roared Ringbolt, in a towering rage; "I'll rope's-end him on sight, were he fifty times Hiram Ferris, with his property behind him! The—the everlasting, drum-dried old codfish!"

The widow burst out laughing, though she was quickly demure again. Perhaps she hardly deemed her hard-fisted neighbor's admiration so much of a crime in itself as it seemed to impress her son and his friend with being, even though she had seen fit to decline the proffered homage.

"It was very dreadful, of course," she murmured, shaking her head, though with an amused glance covertly for Mr. Ringbolt just the same. "But what could I do but refuse the man?"

"Nothing, as a matter of course!" replied Val, with a short laugh. "So no more of that. It is really too absurd. But now about another thing, mother. How about John Gabo and Caliban?"

"Oh! they're to go along."

"What! to England with the others?"

"Yes; Captain Hiram couldn't do without Mr. Gabo, I suppose; and then, since Caliban's conversion to religion, he is no longer the same kind of monster that he was."

They both stared.

"Caliban's conversion!"

"Yes, indeed, my son! and, with his magnificent voice in the meeting-house choir, you would scarcely know it for the same. Then the creature's piety becomes him greatly. Even Mabel manages to tolerate his presence now and then, and you know how she used to dread him. I verily do believe she would find more pleasure in Caliban's conversation than in Lord Rathspey's; though I suppose the latter lives in the hope that she will come to like him better after they reach England."

Val was silent for some moments, while Ringbolt kept his own counsel. Caliban's pretended conversion—for of course, they thought, it could be nothing more than pretense—evidently had a deep significance under it, which was worthy of profound consideration.

"What and where is the ship," Val suddenly demanded, "in which the proposed voyage to England is to be made?"

"It is the Perthshire," replied the widow. "John Gabo bought her for Captain Hiram in New York a fortnight ago. She has since been fitting out at Greenwich, but will be here to-day, to take on board such of Captain Hiram's property as he has not disposed of—and at fair prices, at that, to the British sympathizers hereabouts, who will not but believe that the war is speedily to end with the triumph of the king's troops. She will come under the convoy of the armed brigantine Gamecock, which is Lord Rathspey's, and will be the consort ship all the way to England. They expect to get off this evening or to-morrow morning by way of the Hell's Gate."

Val looked at Ringbolt.

"Don't we know that Gamecock?" he asked.

"Yes," was the reply; "she was in New York Harbor when we were there with our last load of lobsters. She is an hermaphrodite brig, by the way, with six guns, and she's a good one."

"Mother," said Val, abruptly, "you must arrange my meeting with Mabel here at the earliest hour. When shall it be?"

CHAPTER XV.

A LOVER'S TRYST.

"I do not see how I can arrange that, my son," Mistress Venture replied, after a troubled pause. "I could not go to Captain Hiram's with any seemliness now, and Mabel has been forbidden to come to me."

"Good!" continued the young man, calmly. "Then I shall seek her there."

"You? Impossible!" in terror. "Valentine, what can you be thinking of? The whole region swarms with Britishers, or their Tory friends."

"I can't help that; I must see Mabel."

"Do you forget that a price is set on your head?"

"They'll have to take my body before they can get my head, mother. Besides, do you deem me such a dastard as to give Mabel up?"

"No, no! Oh, what shall I do?"

"Let me carry the message," suggested Ringbolt, eagerly.

"No, no! that would be putting the blood-hounds on my son's scent. Wait! yes; I shall manage it somehow, even if I have to go myself."

"But I would not have you lower your pride, mother."

"I shall manage some way without that. Leave it all to me, Valentine. See; the day is come at last. You remember the great chestnut half-way down the slope, where I used to read stories to you as a child?"

"I should say so! That will be the tryst, then?"

"Yes, yes! I will bring her to you there by noon of to-day. In the mean time, both you and Mr. Ringbolt must be very careful. You must not, on your lives, be seen. I shall at once get a breakfast ready for you to take with you into the woods."

This was accordingly done. And, as the two men were stealthily quitting the cottage, a little later on, Mr. Ringbolt greatly surprised both the comely widow and her son by raising the former's plump hand to his bearded lips with solemn and impressive gallantry.

"Oh, Mr. Ringbolt, but you mustn't!" murmured Mrs. Venture, apparently in a great flutter. "Kissing ladies' hands is only indulged in by the ungodly cavaliers, and is one of the vanities of Satan himself."

"Ma'm!" responded the old sailor, tucking up under one arm the covered lunch-hamper which she had provided, and laying his disengaged hand upon the pit of his stomach—doubtless under the impression that it was the region of his heart; "I'd cheerfully be the devil and all his ship's company in a round-robin lump rather than forego such a vanity in your case. If I would not," earnestly, "may I be yard-armed inside of eight bells!"

The adjoining wood was gained, apparently without attracting outside observation.

It was a fresh, early-morning hour of a beautiful day in early August.

As the two men were making their way in silence down the wooded slope, by a little frequented path, they became aware of a singing in the distance, which seemed to wax steadily louder while they listened, as though the owner of the voice were walking slowly toward them.

It presently became distinct as a masculine voice, raised in praiseful song, and of singular beauty and power.

"That is Caliban!" said Val, after a pause. "I have heard him sing before, though never anything heretofore but some ribald tavern catch."

"I'd as lief expect music from a ground shark!" grunted Ringbolt.

"It is one of the strange contradictions in the strange being's make-up—that and his mental power, when he chooses to exert it, or give it a fair chance against his savage instincts. As he seems to be coming this way, let us stand to one side, so that we can observe him without being seen ourselves."

This suggestion was accordingly acted upon.

In the mean time, louder and louder swelled the melodious and sonorous hymn, and presently, when the singer made his way slowly along the path, they were greatly astonished by the transformation that he presented.

He was followed reverently by two church elders of the vicinity, who were instantly recognized as prominent Puritans of—strangely enough in that connection—pronounced Tory predilections, or professions, who seemed to hang upon his songful words with great and solemn satisfaction.

Caliban was most decently attired, after the manner of a Puritan elder of the old time and of no little consequence.

Smalls, and a coat and waistcoat, all snuff-colored and of the severest pattern of the New England of that day; silk hose of the same sober

hue, with low-cut, very square-toed shoes, provided with hideous brass buckles, half the size of door-plates; his head surmounted by a broad, stiff-brimmed, steeple-crowned hat of black felt.

Such was the costume that set off his herculean, uncouth figure to a strangely grotesque degree; and, added to this was the noticeable fact that he was close-shaven and very cleanly.

He looked like an Asmodeus in the Cromwellian garb; and, as he slowly walked and melodiously sung, his enormous mouth, opening and closing sanctimoniously, and his wolfish eyes, dilating or contracting, with the exigencies of the vocal effort, completed the eeriness suggested by his extraordinary aspect.

He gradually paused a few paces from where his secret observers were in concealment, and, as the sonorous modulations of his magnificent voice gradually died away, the attendant elders took him by either arm with approving nods.

"Ah! what a brand plucked from the burning have we found in you at last, Master Gabol!" said one. "Surely, it was a divine interposition that finally brought you into our fold!"

"Truly, it seems so!" supplemented the other. "Master Caliban will carry the truth across the bleak seas with him, and let us trust that he will one day return to us, when our king's righteous authority is finally restored to his wicked, contentious land, such an elect of the Lord as we have not had with us since our sainted Calvin's time."

Caliban rolled up his eyes, and he sighed profoundly.

"I thank you for your kind wishes, Master Sampson, and for your good words, Master Gumper," he feelingly responded. "What, after all, availeth the whole wicked world to me, or what may become of the miserable sinners therein, if I lose not my own soul in the lake of perpetual fire? Leave me now, my brethren, that I may seek my father, whose happy conversion I hope to effect in the course of time. I will pray with you all in the chapel somewhat later on. In the mean time," here he handed one of them a small Bible he had been carrying, "select, I beseech you, Master Sampson, some comforting passage for me, that I may read it aloud while proceeding through the wood."

This was done, and the admiring deacons retraced their steps, leaving him apparently devouring the open text before him with trembling eagerness.

No sooner, however, was Caliban assured that they were well out of sight and hearing than he closed the holy book with a vicious snap, and, thrusting it away into one of his capacious pockets, he not only gave way to a fit of hideous and unseemly mirth, but also began to caper up and down like a goblin possessed.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed. "Ho, ho, ho!" he roared and swore. "A joke, a joke, a pretty joke!"

And, with that, he danced and capered away down the path.

Val and Ringbolt lost no time in gaining the secluded chestnut tree.

"I think," said the former, opening the hamper, and disclosing the excellent viands with which it was provided, "we cannot do better, after the novel exhibition that has been afforded us, than to fall to at once."

And this they did with excellent appetites.

A few hours later, when Val was waiting expectantly at the trysting-tree alone, there was heard a light, hurrying step approaching, and then Mabel Ferris stood before him.

They regarded each other hesitatingly an instant, and then, with a sort of sob, the girl rushed into her lover's extended arms.

CHAPTER XVI.

SMILES AMID TEARS.

THE lovers' meeting was at first no less painful than sweet.

Mabel could only sob as if her heart was breaking, but at the same time clinging to her lover with passionate eagerness, in seeming agony lest Fate might again suddenly snatch her from his dear embrace, now that she was once more nestling therein.

"Tell me first that you did not deem me wantonly false!" she sobbed, at last. "Tell me that at once, Valentine, else I may die of shame, even here with your dear kisses falling upon my face!"

He soothed her with continued caresses and loving words.

"No, no; I could never have believed you that, my precious!" he said. "I was only bewildered, mystified, that was all. You see, dearest, it was impossible for me to return to you quite so soon as I had promised—"

She placed her pretty little hand over his lips.

"Speak not of that!" she cried. "Could that have mattered with me? No, no, Valentine; had you remained absent double the allotted time I would have felt and known you true to me."

"Why, then, has your father—heretofore reputed so faithful to his word, though so stern and proud—dared to break his agreement with me?"

"Because—don't tempt me to speak harshly of him, my beloved! He contends, in the after-

thought, that you did not fulfill your side of the stipulated conditions."

"Why, I had gained the stated money-amount, besides my own ship!"

"He holds—though mind you, Valentine, I don't!—that the one was pirate or blood-money, to which no one could have any natural or legal claim, without becoming an indirect sharer in the crimes that produced it; and that the ship is still the king's ship captured unlawfully by you."

"But this is the merest shuffling and quibbling!" cried Val, indignantly. "An afterthought, indeed! Why didn't he make these objections at the outset?"

"Say no more, dear Val! Of course I think you in the right; but I must obey my father."

"What! you will go to England with him, Mabel?"

"Alas! can I help myself, Val? I am not yet a woman grown, and there is no questioning my father's absolute authority over me."

The young man's face grew troubled. New England bred himself, he could not conscientiously dispute the paternal authority in any case, without a struggle—and Val was both conscientious and religious in the best sense—much as he felt himself to have been duped and wronged.

Moreover, the proprieties were comparatively rigid in those days, and such matters as elopements few and far between.

"Still," he began to murmur, his brow darkening, "would your father have come to this decision, Tory as he is, but for Lord Rathspey's suggestion?"

"I don't know, Val; perhaps not. But don't look at me in that way. Lord Rathspey is nothing, and can never be anything to me."

She said this with such earnest simplicity that Val's face began to clear.

"But your father's object and hope is to see you one day Lady Rathspey," he said, bitterly. "You must see that, Mabel?"

"And what if I do?" Her lips began to tremble, the sweet eyes to fill with tears again. "He shall see me in my coffin first."

"Rather say," and her lover once more took her in his arms, "he shall see, or at least know you as my wife first, dearest!"

"I can only trust that, hope that!" she murmured. "You are my love, Val—come what may, my true and my only love!"

"Oh, what must be thought of such a scoundrel as this, Rathspey?" cried Val bitterly.

"Do not say that, dearest. He is not, I think, a scoundrel, but simply a man passionately in love with me, as I am so sadly glad to know that you are—only hopelessly, as he must know and feel."

"Then why doesn't he give you up, as an honorable gentleman should?"

"Do men in love ever do that?"

"But he must hope that you will ultimately become his, when you and the captain are fairly in England with him."

She did not answer.

Val's lips tightened. He was on the verge of a wrathful explosion against Captain Hiram, and did not wish to give way to it.

"What is this about Gabo and Caliban going along?" he asked, abruptly.

"They go with us, Val. That is all I know, Val."

A new fear, or it might be called horror, for her came rushing into the young man's thoughts.

He spoke of the seeming transformation in Caliban's case, and the queer scene Ringbolt and he had witnessed.

"I can't think of Caliban altogether as a hypocrite," Mabel replied, after a thorough pause. "He seems so earnest in the meetings, and is so respectful to me!"

"He earnest! But you were not wont to speak thus leniently of that savage, Mabel."

In spite of her misery, a smile came into her face.

"Do not tell me you are jealous of Caliban?" she almost laughed.

"God's mercy, no! But there is danger for you there; I feel it."

"Oh, Val! he goes with us in the same ship. That is all."

"Mabel, you must not go!"

She started.

"Why, it is my father's will, Valentine!"

"What of that? You are mine and love's first in the sight of God!"

"What would you have me do?"

"Fly with me in the Spray Sprite!"

"Oh! and—before we are married?"

"I shall see to that. There are parsons enough along the coast." Then seeing that she was impressed with the notion, though startled by it, he continued to urge her with all the passionate eloquence at his command. "We shall go to France," he cried, in conclusion. "France is the friend of America, as you know, dearest, and also on the point of a declaration of war with accursed and perfidious England. There you can remain as my beloved wife, while I am fighting for our country on the high seas. Say that you will come, Mabel, this very night!"

The young girl wrung her hands. It was a terrible thing to set one's father's authority at

naught; but then how basely that father had broken his pledge! and, moreover, she was in her lover's arms.

"Oh, I want to do what is right!" she cried, her heart sore with the struggle. "What shall I do?"

"You shall resign yourself to love and me!" cried Val, showering his kisses upon her face. "That is what you must do, my angel! Oh, I love you, love you, love you! My life, my love, my beautiful! you cannot hesitate between love and misery—assured joy and another horrible separation!"

But she suddenly tore herself from his embrace, and stood there white and trembling.

"Val, I cannot yet decide! I must take time to think, to deliberate, to pray."

"But there is no time."

"Yes; for it will not take long. Listen, Val. I must be alone, I must pray for strength and judgment to do what is right. Oh, if my mother were but alive, or if I had ever known a mother's sympathy and care!"

A man's love is ever selfish; but for all that, Val was touched by her forlornness of spirit, as evidenced by those piteous words.

"Go to my mother!" he suggested.

But she only looked at him with a poor little smile.

"No! but listen, Val. I shall see you again at this spot. You will then know if I can or cannot consent to elope with you."

She had fully resolved upon this, and was not to be shaken.

They finally separated, with the understanding that they were to meet again at the same tryst in the middle of the afternoon, and Val saw to it that their temporary parting was emphasized by a particularly passionate embrace as a reminder.

As he turned to retrace his steps toward the spot where Ringbolt had been left in waiting, a chance opening amid the trees gave him an unexpected view of a broad stretch of the bay.

There, in addition to the Osprey, two vessels, which had come in within the past hour, were at anchor.

One was a trim brigantine, with the unmistakable characteristics of a war-vessel, which Val made up his mind must be Lord Rathspey's Gamecock; and the other, a full-rigged ship, which seemed to be having constant communication with the shore, he doubted not was Captain Hiram's new purchase, the Perthshire.

Ringbolt confirmed him in these impressions, and then, after Val had briefly related the result of his interview with his sweetheart, they pushed on further down through the wood, in order to get a nearer view of what was going on at Ferris's boat-landing, if that might be done without risk of an exposure.

Suddenly Val, who was in the lead, missed his footing on a treacherous root, and went plunging down the steep with something of a crash.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DISCOVERY.

THE young man, however, had sufficient presence of mind to abstain from any outcry, and presently brought up with something of a shock, but no great damage, into a clump of underwood some yards down the slope.

"Ahoy, there!" Ringbolt called down after him in a hoarse whisper. "Are you all right, messmate?"

Val was cautiously extricating himself from the briars.

For answer he looked up and waved his hand warningly, while at the same time beckoning his companion to follow him down where he was.

This Ringbolt did in silence and with a sailor's celerity, though the steep was rocky, difficult and densely overgrown.

"Hush!" whispered Val, "be perfectly quiet, and listen. There!"

"What was that?" said a muffled sort of voice, apparently from somewhere in the bosom of the hill.

"It was nothing of consequence," replied another voice, equally mysterious.

"My father, you are altogether too suspicious. Had you brooded in this cave as much as I have, you would not take alarm at every loosened stone tumbling down the hillside overhead."

Then the voices were less distinct, though they could still be heard in continued conversation.

Both listeners now knew that they were in the vicinity, probably directly overhead of some cave, in which a secret conference of some sort was in progress.

Val made a sign to his companion, and then they both began to move cautiously here and there amid the thicket, in the hope of coming to a better point for hearing, and perhaps observation.

The old sailor's eyes presently twinkled, and he signed Val to approach.

Ringbolt had chanced upon a craggy fissure, through which not only could the voices once more be heard distinctly, but their owners could be seen.

As the reader has doubtless surmised, the cave was the one into whose mysteries Caliban had inducted his father on a previous occasion.

They could now be seen in earnest converse, seated upon a large rock near the entrance; and between them was what the secret observers instantly recognized as the bag of pirate-treasure with which Caliban succeeded in making his escape, though it seemed less plethoric than originally.

"Now, father," Caliban was saying, "there should be no conflict in our plans, but everything should be at harmony between us before we set out upon this voyage. This you will see the sensibleness of."

"Certainly, my son," was Gabo's reply. "But what better plan than mine?"

"Your plan!" with a laugh.

"Yes, indeed!"

"What! to wait till they all get safely to England?"

"That is it."

"And what opportunity would be left for me to get possession of the girl?"

"Well, with our present secret wealth, and after we should have disposed of some of these rare jewels, you could make your opportunity, Caliban."

"Ha! especially with this rare figure of mine, as against Lord Rathspey's insignificance!" with fierce irony.

And then, with his hoarse laugh, Caliban posed sarcastically for the better display of his uncouthness.

"This is of no moment," said John Gabo, in his composed and smileless way. "Money can work miracles with a young girl's vanity."

"It can't transform a satyr into an Apollo!" cried Caliban, bitterly. "Now, were I of such an appearance as Val Venture's, there were no need of gilding; but being of the nightmare presence that I am—faugh!"

"You underrate your capacities," continued Gabo, earnestly. "True, if you were of such a person as young Venture's (the devil grant that he may be yard-armed by this time, as he is sure to be sooner or later!) you would not need to be rich, for Mistress Mabel's heart is already in that dare-devil's possession we can scarcely doubt. But, as it is, you have much to offset the harshness with which Nature has treated you externally. You have an intelligence that fills me with wonder, Caliban," fondly. "You can sing like a seraph. Hide but your face, and your tongue might plead more dulcely for love than any man's. And I remarked that our young lady does not regard you with quite such loathing as heretofore."

Caliban gave a sort of furious snort.

"Enough of this madness!" he exclaimed, harshly. "Hide but my face! Ay, but what will ever hide or mask it, save the grave-earth tumbling on my coffin-lid? And she does not loathe me quite so much!—Ha, ha, ha!" with fierce merriment. "As if that were not explicable!"

"What do you mean, Caliban?"

"Just this: She hates Rathspey, and would make a sort of bulwark of me between him and her love for that accursed boy-adventurer. That is all."

"She doesn't hate Rathspey, but merely doesn't return his devotion."

"I tell you, she hates him," savagely.

"Why, then, should you fear his rivalry in England any more than here?"

"Because he is handsome, refined and devoted. She may come to pity him; and, almost gnashing his teeth, 'from pity to tenderness is but a step with women.'"

"But a woman's vanity is, I believe, stronger than her emotions, Caliban. These jewels of ours, once fairly disposed of in London, your fortune will be twenty times such as this lordling can boast. Besides, Puritanism and primitiveness are not in favor in those corrupt and brilliant places. You would only have to test the girl with the single set of diamonds that are not loose in our collection. See!"

He emptied the treasure-bag of its contents out upon the flat stone, and, selecting from the heap of glittering loose gems a superb necklace and tiara of numerous and rich diamonds in a gold setting of curious barbaric design, held them up in the sunshine that glistened in at the cavern entrance, where they shook and flashed like a suspended rivulet of white fire.

"Behold! this shall be your first gift to the demure nymph, Caliban. See how gloriously they flash. The setting is either Etruscan or Damascene, I know not which; but the trinkets are worthy of a Moorish queen. Think you she could resist them?"

Caliban looked on unmoved.

"Yes, and would—in London," he replied; "but on the broad ocean, and with a bold corsair crew at my back, perhaps not."

John Gabo shook his head while returning the treasures to the pouch.

"The same dream!" he commented, curtly.

"And why not, father? It is a better plot than yours."

"Piracy is a risky business, Caliban; I ought to know."

"So is privateering, for that measure, and Val Venture has not shrunk from accepting the hazard."

"Still, it has not gained him his sweetheart."

"But piracy will gain mine for me, or noth-

ing will. Father, think you I can have forgotten the long cruise I took with you under the brave black flag when I was a boy?" The non-descript's eyes were blazing with enthusiasm. "Oh!" with a wild oath; "but it is the only sea-life, father! I cannot understand how you ever quitted it."

"Death, for others, may be sweet," said the Portuguese, enigmatically. "But life for one's self is sweeter."

"So! you mean the consciousness of being safe out of it with a whole skin and an uncracked neck?"

Gabo nodded.

Caliban snapped his fingers.

"'Tis the life for me!" he cried.

"But, with your present wealth, you have no need to venture it."

"To the devil with a dead bravo's blood-money! I would ravage the seas for it in my own person. And look at me!" with another fierce laugh. "Blackbeard himself would have seemed mild and innocent in comparison. I would become a name for horror and despair and destruction! They might know me as the bristling man-boar of the waves, the human shark, the tiger of the deep. Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you would win the Puritan maiden in that way?"

"Forsooth, I would! because she would be mine by right of conquest, and because there is no other way to have her. My plan is best, father; and you must give in to it."

"What! to capture the gamecock in mid-ocean, and turn pirate in her?"

"Exactly. I repeat to you, all my plans are already arranged to that end. Whose money bought the Perthshire? Captain Hiram's, through your agency. But who selected her crew, more than half of whom are desperate spirits that the proper leadership will cause to leap to my proposition, when matured, while my gold can corrupt the rest at will? Then I have also been careful to have my adherents on the Gamecock. At a signal from me, the thing will be done, and the rover's life launched."

"What shall you do with the Perthshire?"

"Ferris and Rathspey may have her to get to England in, after we shall have stripped her. But that will depend."

"Depend on what, Caliban?"

"On how Mistress Mabel shall treat me."

"Ah, I see!"

"Come, father," a little impatiently. "Is it my plan, or is it not?"

"You wish me to strike hands on it?"

"Of course, I do! there must be no misunderstanding between us."

Slowly but resolutely John Gabo's hand was extended, and the terrible compact between them was sealed.

At that instant footsteps were heard approaching the mouth of the cave.

"It is Captain Hiram!" exclaimed Caliban, in his harsh whisper. "Quick, father; to your task!"

With that, he swept the treasure-bag out of sight, and producing a hymn-book, began to sing a selection in a soft, sweet voice, while John Gabo assumed a deeply thoughtful and devotional attitude.

They were thus engaged when Captain Hiram entered the cave.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CALIBAN'S PLOT.

"Now the Lord be praised!" exclaimed the old shipmaster, holding up his hands, in one of which he held his heavy gold-headed walking-stick; "but this is, indeed, seemly and gratifying. Are you making any serious impression upon your worldly father's heart in the Lord's holy name, Caliban?"

Caliban had laid down his book, and looked half-reproachfully up, the sweet singing dying softly upon his terrible lips, while John Gabo somewhat relinquished his prayerful attitude to turn subserviently to the new-comer.

"Yea, very, worshipful sir," replied the former, hopefully. "I do believe my father is beginning to perceive the truth. By the time we reach England, I hope to have made a God-fearing and Christian man of him."

"That is well," continued Ferris; "but now it behooves you to cut short your sacred exercises, both of you, for the observance of more temporal matters, though it is all none the less in the name of the Lord and his Majesty, King George. Our ship is lading rapidly, but it will require our united exertions in the business, if we are to get off by to-night's turn of the tide to make the difficult passage of the Hell's Gate in security, together with our consort. Besides," and the shipmaster's brow appeared to grow troubled, "I have just got wind of what may prove a fresh danger for us."

Both Gabo and Caliban had risen obediently to their feet.

"What is the new danger that you apprehend, my master?" demanded the former.

"That worldly woman, the Widow Venture," replied Captain Hiram, "has had visitors at daybreak to-day—two men, who were observed departing from her cottage by one of my servants, though at too great a distance to determine their recognition. However, they may

possibly have been, I opine, that graceless enemy of our lord, the king, Val Venture, and one of his lawless associates."

"Val Venture!" echoed Caliban, the wild-beast look coming into his natural hideousness of aspect, and his great, hairy hands beginning to work convulsively. "Why, he is reported to have sailed for France!"

"It may have been only an idle rumor, however. But our spies have been doubled hereabouts. I doubt me if escape is possible for him if he be, indeed, in the neighborhood."

"How could he have made his way hither?" asked Gabo.

"Perhaps by the Osprey, his old smack, which is newly arrived in the bay. But I have her placed under guard already, together with Holcomb, the man to whom he leased her, and his boy, as a matter of common precaution. They pretend to be very innocent, of course; but, as both are rebels, there is no dependence to be placed upon their declarations. Come, let us bestir ourselves."

He hurried out of the cave, followed by Gabo and Caliban, the latter with his hand thrust into his bosom and a murderousness of facial expression, which boded no good for the young privateersman, should he chance to fall into the strange monster's hands.

Ringbolt's hand had closed suggestively upon Val's arm in their concealed post of observation.

"Patience, messmate!" he whispered. "It's an ill wind that blows no good. Shiver my timbers! If Caliban isn't forgetting the jewel-bag, which he slipped out of sight under yonder stone when the old skipper was heaving in sight."

Vain hope! Scarcely had he ceased speaking before Caliban hurriedly returned, and, after securing the treasure upon his person, vanished again.

"Devil's luck!" growled Captain Val, between his teeth. "The whole wood will doubtless be ransacked for us, and, with the Osprey in their possession, our last hope of escape seems gone."

"Avast, there!" said his companion, cheerfully. "Never count yourself hanged till the halter draws, my hearty! As for the wood being ransacked, what of that, since we shan't be found there? Come on!"

And with this he began to force himself down through the fissure.

The wisdom of this move was so apparent that Val lost no time in following, carefully restoring to their original undisturbed appearance the brambles and brushwood at the fissure's mouth behind him.

They presently stood in a sort of rude inner chamber of the cave, where, at a single glance it was evident that they might remain in security both from search overhead and from discovery by the main cave-entrance.

In other words, they found themselves in a species of rear pocket of the main cave, communicating with the latter by a jagged passage just possible for a man to squeeze through, and whose existence had, in all probability, never been suspected by Caliban himself.

"Here we are, snug as a rat in a fo'cas'le," said Ringbolt, smiling.

"Yes," admitted Val. "But you must remember that I have another appointment with Mabel at the chestnut-tree for this afternoon, which will necessitate my threading the outer wood again at least once before dark."

"Bad, that! but we must make the best of it. Howsoever!" and Ringbolt looked suddenly inspired; "blow me tight if I haven't an idea as is an idee, messmate!"

"What is it?"

"Do you think the young lady's decision will be to sign ship's papers with you for a life-cruise?"

"I can only hope so," was the rather despondent reply. "Mabel is a very conscientious young lady, Tom."

"Ay, ay! bang-up clipper-built, with true colors, or none, at her gaff. I understand, my friend. Axing your Honor's indulgence, Mistress Margaret Venture is a craft of the same sort, full-rigged, tight and sea-worthy, and coppered for a life voyage with the man of her heart."

"Ye-a, I suppose so."

"Now, look here, messmate. This is my idee: If your mother could make up her mind to go along with us in the Sea Sprite, wouldn't that help Mistress Mabel to a like determination?"

"Why, yes; I haven't a doubt but it would. Still—"

"Still, it hadn't occurred to you before, and you're consequently taken a little aback at the suggestion. Eh?"

"That is about it, old comrade."

"But might your mother consent?"

"I'm sure I can't say. However, after Mabel and I shall both be gone—either together, or in different ships, which the Lord forbid!—there will be little comfort or security in my mother's remaining hereabouts alone."

"Eggsactly!" and Ringbolt slapped him between the shoulder-blades. "Here you be, then. While you are risking your second interview with your young lady, I shall be doing the same with your darling mother. Suppose they both

consent. Well, what better place to stow 'em away snug than right here in this back-cave, where it seems to me they'll keep till the Spray Sprite comes into the bay this night. Then to put the dear creatures on board, while a boat's crew are looking arter their personal traps and other property, ought to be short work, my hearty."

The more Val thought of it, the less wild and more practicable did this proposition seem.

"In that event," he said, after a reflective pause, "we shall have to risk a fight with the Gamecock."

"What of that? The ladies can be stowed out of harm's way in our cockpit; and then it will be just a question as to how many iron pills we shall give to the armed brigantine before showing her our heels."

"It is a bargain, then; and Heaven grant us success!" cried Captain Val, with his usual energy when once determined on a thing. "Now let us slip out of this hole for a lookout."

They passed into the main cavern, and thence to the open air; whence, constantly on the lookout against observation or a surprise, they skirted the wooded hillside to a small glade, or opening, affording an uninterrupted view of the bay and its adjacent shores.

The Perthshire, which lay within half a mile of Captain Hiram's boat-landing at the edge of the marsh, was busy taking on the old Tory's household and other property, her boats being constantly passing and repassing, while both the vessel's decks and the landing presented an industrious appearance.

The Gamecock was at anchor a mile further out in the bay, looking trim, business-like and formidable.

"The Osprey is no longer visible," observed Val. "They've probably got her under guard up in the cove yonder. I shall hardly forgive myself if Holcomb and his apprentice are hanged for having befriended me in this pinch!"

"Don't borrow trouble, messmate," was the old veteran's response. "Hallo! what little craft is that at the mouth of the cove?"

"Ah! that is John Gabo's Seamew. A faster shallop doesn't skim salt water. It is the same that Caliban used when rescuing Lord Ratspey out of our clutches."

"Messmate, by nightfall that shallop must be in our possession, should the Spray Sprite be tardy about coming to time. We could even spirit the ladies away in her, should the worst come to the worst."

"I think we might manage it. But Heaven grant that the Spray Sprite is not tardy in coming to time."

They presently returned to the cave, and then, later on, when Val had posted himself at the trysting tree, in anticipation of Mabel's promised visit, Ringbolt slipped on through the wood, with the intention of laying his proposition before Mistress Venture.

CHAPTER XIX.

PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS.

It was with the profoundest suspense that Val Venture awaited the coming of Mabel Ferris, after being left alone at the trysting-tree.

What was to be her decision? Would her heart triumph, and cause her to elect to give all for love and him? Or would what she might regard as her bounden duty to a perfidious sire's commands compel her to give to her rover-lover then and there an adieu, which would, in the nature of things, be forever?

At last, however, he heard the rustling of her step; and then, at the first glimpse of her lovely face suspense was at an end.

No need for a second perusal of that charming index of her maidenly thoughts and emotions to perceive that her election had been made, and that it was in favor of him.

"Mabel, my darling!"

"Valentine!"

And then they were in each other's arms.

In a few broken words, she related the mental and spiritual struggle she had undergone in deciding that her true devotion and homage were thenceforth due to love alone.

"But let us lose not an instant in secreting ourselves!" she then exclaimed, hurriedly. "I am satisfied that my father suspects your presence in the neighborhood."

"And I am even surer of that than you can be," he replied. "Come!" and he at once began to lead her away in the direction of the cave. "Fate is with us, I trust; and, moreover, I hope to have an agreeable surprise for you."

"What is it, Valentine?"

"What do you think of my mother as a fellow-voyager for you?"

Mabel stopped to clasp her hands.

"Oh, but do you mean it?" she exclaimed, delightedly. "And will she really accompany us, Val?"

He told her of Ringbolt's mission, and what was hoped for it.

"Hasten now, my beloved!" he then urged. "There is but this open glade to cross. Then, when once in that thicket beyond—"

Here Mabel shrieked, and started to fly; for, with a shout, three red-coated British marines and a negro servant, with Captain Hiram him-

self at their head, were seen to be in hot pursuit.

Val, grinding his teeth, kept at her side for a few paces. Then, perceiving that, by reason of the young girl's inconvenient attire, they must necessarily be overtaken, he called upon her to stop, and then wheeled in his tracks, drawing his sword.

"Upon him!" roared the shipmaster, brandishing his cane. "It is the rebel privateersman, Val Venture himself. There's a price on his head, dead or alive!"

But two of the marines had already recoiled before the young man's dauntless sword-play, one with a slit cheek, the other with a wound in the wrist, while the third was bringing his loaded musket to bear.

At this juncture, however, Mabel dashed forward, with a shriek, striking up the weapon so that it was discharged harmlessly in the air.

But at the same instant Val's sword was shivered to the hilt by a stroke from Captain Hiram's walking-stick; and then, after a brief struggle, he was overpowered and secured.

"Away with him to the court-martial!" cried the old Tory, exultantly. "His neck is the penalty!"

Mabel had stood erect, wide-eyed and grief-stricken, for a moment, and then she bowed her face in her hands without a word or a sob—the picture of absolute and tearless despair.

"Captain Hiram Ferris," exclaimed Val Venture, with withering, contemptuous scorn, "bound as I am, with an ignominious death staring me in the face, I would not exchange places with you in your triumph—a traitor to your country, your pledge dishonored, your word broken, a forsworn, perjured and perfidious wretch!"

Captain Hiram only shrugged his shoulders indifferently in response, but he did not dare to meet the young privateersman's accusing glance.

"Away with him!" he repeated, without looking up. "And as for you, Mistress Independence!" turning sternly upon his daughter, and grasping her wrist, "I will this instant see you on board my ship, there to remain under watch and guard until we are fairly under way."

The young girl drew herself up to her full height, and the glance of her eye was also one which the old man avoided.

"Sir," she said, coldly, "do with me as you will. If this, my lover, be indeed doomed, I shall but briefly survive his death; and, in the mean time, know this much, that my filial respect and duty are henceforth at an end."

Hiram, unable to reply, turned furiously upon his followers.

"What are you waiting for?" he demanded.

"Away with that proscribed rebel to the court-martial, which is even now in session in Norwalk village!"

"Wait!" interspersed a strangely deep and rasping voice, and then Caliban Gabo strode into view. "Let me be responsible for your prisoner, Captain Ferris. I think," with a diabolical grin, "you can safely intrust him into my tender custody."

Another shriek seemed rising to Mabel's lips, but she repressed it.

As for Captain Hiram, he could scarcely disguise his satisfaction.

He had some notion of a fiendish hatred of Val Venture on the part of Caliban, and doubted not that, in spite of the latter's pious professions of late, to intrust the prisoner to his charge was equivalent to securing his death, in one way or another, with the least possible ceremony.

"Have thy wish, my friend," he answered.

"The prisoner is delivered into your custody. See that he is presented to the court-martial without delay; or, at all events, see that he does not escape!"

Caliban bowed, and passing to where Val was standing with his wrists bound behind him, he looked at him with an inscrutable glance.

"Caliban!" called out Mabel.

The nondescript merely looked up, met her glance and bowed again.

Not another word was exchanged, but somehow they seemed to understand each other.

The shipmaster now hurried away in the direction of the boat-landing, still grasping his daughter's wrist, the marines and servant following him.

Caliban and his prisoner were thus left alone.

To the surprise and mystification of the latter, who could expect nothing but death at the strangely terrible creature's hands, Caliban addressed him not unkindly, and with a repetition of that inscrutable look.

"Shall you follow me obediently, Valentine Venture?" he said. "Or must I resort to the force, of which you ought to know me capable?"

"Proceed whither you will, Caliban," answered the young commander, after a moment's reflection. "I shall follow you without questioning."

Caliban thereupon strode forward through the wood, and finally brought up at the mouth of the cave.

Then, having pinioned his prisoner in a sitting posture with his back against a large rock at the side of the opening, he quietly produced a very

large and murderous-looking knife, which he laid upon another and smaller rock near at hand.

"Observe!" said he, shortly.

Then, with a touch of the foot, he caused a sort of mask of greenery on the opposite side of the narrow path to disappear tumbling down the steep slope beyond, whereby an instant view of the entire bay was obtained, together with the busy scene in progress at the boat-landing.

The prisoner could with difficulty abstain from expressing his surprise, and thus betraying his foreknowledge of the locality; for he had marked the green barrier before, and deemed it a natural growth of evergreens, as a matter of course.

"Val Venture, we are enemies," said Caliban, in the same quiet, self-contained tone.

"We are," responded the prisoner.

"You are, therefore, scarcely such a fool as to suppose that I shall spare your life?"

"Of course not; I suppose nothing of the kind."

"Humph!"

Caliban took up the knife and felt its point.

"Observe yonder landing!" he exclaimed, with a terrible look. "When Mistress Mabel shall be seen to be securely transferred from the shore to the ship, that shall be my signal for using this knife. Now observe intently."

Val did so, and with an absolute despair at heart which required all his fortitude to conceal.

Presently Mabel was seen to reach the landing in her father's custody. Both stepped into a loaded boat in readiness to start; the oarsmen bowed to their work; in ten minutes father and daughter had ascended the ship's side, and vanished over the rail.

Caliban's eyes were glowing with a strange fire.

Knife in hand, he stepped to his helpless captive's side and laid a touch upon his breast, as if to assure himself of the exact position of the heart within.

"You are no coward, Val Venture," he said, raising the knife. "I detect no craven flutter here."

CHAPTER XX.

CALIBAN'S REVENGE.

VAL managed to smile even in this dreadful moment, which he doubted not was his last on earth.

"I have never been a coward, Caliban," he returned, quietly. "Now that you are sure of my heart, strike home!"

"Ah, and let you die so easily?" he replied. "Not so, Val Venture. I am about to use this knife, but in a way that you little anticipate."

Now at last Val could not avoid a change of color.

Was he to be tortured first, and murdered afterward—assassinated piecemeal?

"Here goes!" cried Caliban, with a burst of his unearthly laughter.

With that, he severed his captive's bonds at a stroke, and quietly put the weapon out of sight.

"Val Venture, you are free! This is Caliban's revenge!"

Val could scarcely believe his senses.

He stood looking blankly at the seemingly benign monster, while mechanically working his arms and wrists, in which the circulation had been suspended by the tightness of his bonds—bonds that were now no more.

Caliban smiled again, and this time with deadlier subtlety.

"I permit you to live," he said, "but for my own purpose—that you may suffer! When she who was your Mabel disappeared over yon vessel's side, it meant, not only that she was lost to you, but gained to me. Now do you understand?"

Val did understand, knowing as he did the piratical plot, but he only shook his head.

"That vessel," continued Caliban, "will before long be mine. Everything on board of her that I particularly care for will be transferred to yonder brigantine when I rule the latter's deck as her pirate commander, with the black flag floating over me. Now, I very particularly care for Mistress Mabel."

"You cannot mean it!" cried Val.

Caliban nodded carelessly.

"In yonder cave," he went on, "you will probably find security against further immediate pursuit. To give you even a better chance, I shall create the impression that you have been murdered by me. Good-by, Val Venture—farewell forever! I leave you with life and freedom, but with the jealous tortures of the damned."

Without another word he strode away and disappeared down the wooded slope in the direction of the boat-landing.

Still hardly realizing what had happened, Val went into the cave.

"Hallo, my hearty!" cried a well-known voice.

And then Tom Ringbolt, accompanied by the Widow Venture stepped out of the inner obscurity to meet him.

"Oh, my son!" cried the widow, springing into the young man's arms; "you are still saved to me, though poor Mabel is hopelessly lost to us both!"

Val returned his mother's embrace, while looking to Ringbolt inquiringly.

"We witnessed your capture," explained the latter, "and then slipped into the inner cave yonder by the back entrance that you wot of, messmate. But think not that Caliban could have murdered you in cold blood, even had he so minded." He pointed to the pistol in his belt. "I had him secretly covered from behind that point of rock to which he had lashed you. Before his knife could have descended with hostile intent my bullet would have reached his heart."

Val grasped the old sailor's hand.

"What!" he exclaimed; "but I am still more or less bewildered. And you consent to go with us, my mother?"

"Yes, my son," replied the handsome widow.

"At least, I had allowed Mr. Ringbolt to persuade me to the strange step in your interest and Mabel's, but now that she is snatched from you—"

"You will still accompany us!" cried the young privateersman. "You think she is hopelessly lost to me? Never! We shall cut out the Perthshire this side of Hell Gate, or, failing in that, do the same for her in mid-sea. Oh, yes; you are still to go with us, mother."

"To be sure she is!" echoed the old sailor.

"Think, Mistress Venture, how little would be left for you hereabouts arter we have slipped our cable!"

The widow finally consented that it should be so; and then they all went out for a glimpse of the bay, the afternoon being by this time nigh spent, with twilight near.

To their disappointment and chagrin, both the Perthshire and the Gamecock were seen to be already getting under way.

Communication between the former and the shore had definitely ceased, and in less than half an hour both vessels would doubtless be taking advantage of the stiffish southeast wind that was blowing.

"They will escape us!" cried Val, furiously. "Captain Hiram must have purposely hastened the hour. Oh, for one glimpse of the Spray Sprite's topsails bent to this brave breeze!"

"Avast there!" rebuked the veteran. "Don't cry Breakers ahead! afore you see the grinning of their teeth, my hearty! Look yonder!"

A last boat was seen, as he pointed away, to be putting off from the brigantine. Captain Hiram was observed to be taken aboard from the Perthshire, and then she pulled in toward the landing.

"Something forgotten ashore; that is all," growled Val, discontentedly.

"Not quite all, messmate. Now look yonder!"

And Ringbolt again pointed away, though in a different direction.

Val's heart gave a joyous leap.

"The Spray Sprite, by Jupiter!" he exclaimed.

It was true, though only her topmasts were thus far visible.

"She is slipping into the southeast cove down yonder," said Ringbolt, complacently. "Courage, friends. We shall be able to get a better squint of her presently from this look-out, though the folks down yonder in the bay will be none the wiser. There! what did I tell you?"

Even as he spoke, the privateer came fully in sight for an instant as she was slipping silently into the cove, and a boat could even be seen being got in readiness.

"We must feel our way down to meet them," said Ringbolt. "Then, Mistress Venture, the boat's crew will make short work with such traps as you feel you must carry away with you from your cottage."

"I shall run back thither, and get everything in readiness, while Val and you bring up the men," said the widow, starting away.

"Wait! there may be danger," interposed Val. "We must not lose sight of you again, mother."

"Nonsense!" she replied. "Captain Hiram must have finished with his shore work by this time. I shall have my wardrobe and valuables packed up against your reaching the cottage with your men; and you may make all the haste you like."

With that, she darted away up the slope in the direction of her cottage, while Val and Ringbolt, without thinking to cast another glance at Captain Hiram's movements in the Gamecock's boat, hurried off to meet the Spray Sprite's yawl.

The cove, into which the schooner had managed to creep so snugly and unobtrusively, was shut in by two wooded points about a mile eastward of the mouth of Norwalk Bay proper.

Val and Ringbolt were perceived by the boat's crew as soon as they had crested the first ridge, and they reached them just as the landing was being effected.

Dick Maltby, the boatswain, was in command, and he reported everything well and in tip-top shape for perilous work on board the Sprite.

Val at once explained the situation, and, with the exception of one man in charge of the boat, the entire crew, consisting of five men, or seven,

including Val and Ringbolt, started for the widow's cottage.

It was quite dark before they could more than half cover the distance, and then a bright light suddenly made itself apparent over the tree-tops ahead.

"Good heavens!" said Val, exchanging a look with Ringbolt; "can my mother's cottage be on fire?"

It proved to be so.

As they reached the spot, the cottage was in flames.

Then a woman's cry came floating up to them from the pathway below.

The widow was being carried off by Captain Hiram, at the head of a boat's crew from the Gamecock, who were laden with the traps which she had packed in readiness for her son's party, and which had doubtless been hurriedly seized at the old shipmaster's commands just prior to giving the place to the torch.

After the first excitement was over, Val Venture was secretly not altogether desperate at this turn of affairs, so far as the disposition of his mother was concerned.

He knew her as perfectly able to take care of herself in any emergency, and, moreover, she would be most probably better off as Mabel's companion and adviser on the Perthshire than on the privateer, at least pending the time when he should be able to transfer them both to the schooner, which he doubted not his ability to do.

But with Ringbolt, who was secretly head-over-ears in love with the widow, it was quite different.

He so far forgot his customary prudence as to actually rave and stamp his feet.

"Come on!" he cried. "Pistols and cutlasses to the fore! Follow me!"

"Hold!" exclaimed Val; "this is madness. Not only are they two to one against us, but we must not betray the secret of the Spray Sprite's proximity. Besides, no harm can come to my mother, since Mabel and she will be together until we shall effect their rescue from the ship."

CHAPTER XXI.

A RIVER FIGHT.

BUT it was some time before Tom Ringbolt would listen to reason.

"A pretty sort of son you are, Val Venture!" he roared; "to let your own mother be carried off thus under your very eyes! To the deuce with you then! I'll go after her myself, by jingol!"

Val clutched his arm.

"Stop right where you are!" he cried, menacingly. "Who is master, Tom Ringbolt, you or I?"

"But, blast the luck!" the other continued to rave; "don't you see that the old goat of a shipmaster wants the lady, nilly willy, for his wife, and is abducting of her?"

"That is enough, I tell you! If Captain Hiram doesn't rue this action as soon as my mother's tongue is fairly loosened upon him, after they are on shipboard, then I don't know anything of her temper. What is it to you, anyway?"

"More than you think, perhaps," growled the veteran, sullenly submitting. "Well, well; have your way, then."

"So I intend! And do you think it is nothing for me to see the house in which I was born burn up before my eyes, to say nothing of my dear mother being carried off? Right about face, there!"

The return to the boat was made forthwith, and half an hour later, with all on board, the Spray Sprite slipped out of the cove as silently as she had entered it.

The moon was just rising, silvering the ruffled waters with her pure light, and both the Perthshire and her consort were well on their way up the Sound.

The privateer was in pursuit, with an ease and grace of movement that betokened her ability to outtail the fugitives at her pleasure, though, to be sure, the narrowing of the space where the Sound would merge into the East River would hardly afford much opportunity for maneuvering.

"Our knowledge of these ways ought to enable us to cut out the Perthshire somewhere this side of the Gate," argued Captain Val. "What do you say, Ringbolt?"

This was on the quarter-deck of the Sprite, and her first mate, thus addressed, rolled his quid into his cheek with an owlish look.

"Ought to" and really doing a thing are sometimes different," he growled. "Oh, yes, sir! I reckon we'll play the devil."

"Come, old friend!" and Val held out his hand in his frank, winning way; "you're not still sore?"

"Yes, I am."

"Look here," smiling, "I'll tell you what I'll do."

"What is it, your Honor?"

"My Honor be blowed!"

"I'm willing."

Val laughed.

"This is what I'll do, Ringbolt. I know you have more than a sneaking fondness for my mother. Well, when Mabel and she are transferred

from yonder floating prison of theirs to this brave deck, if my mother should offer no objection, you shall have her son's support in the wooing of her."

"What!" cried Ringbolt. "But you don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do; and there is my hand on it."

The veteran gave a sort of suppressed huzza, and the hands came together with an earnest grip.

"Now," said Val, laughing, "perhaps you will vouchsafe to give me the opinion I asked for?"

"Won't I! Well, my boy, with what we know of the Gate, and what the Britishers don't, we ought to be able to cut out the ship, for a dead surety, provided the Gamecock leads the way down through the swirl, as she seems intendin' to do. How is it aboard the transport now? They haven't suspicioned of our true colors yet, I hope."

"I think not," replied Captain Val, bringing his night-glass to bear. "We ought not to have excited an alarm in our present guise."

The Spray Sprite had been so disguised about the hull as to give her a decidedly commercial and innocent look, while the British Union Jack was fluttering at her gaff.

"No," said Val, dropping the glass, after an earnest scrutiny of the Perthshire, which was now under shortened sail about a mile and a half ahead. "She evidently takes us for what we pretend to be—a coastwise craft anxious to make port off the Battery at New York before the tide changes—and is paying no attention to us whatever."

"How far ahead of her do you make out the Gamecock to be?" and the mate bent forward, with his eyes fastened upon both vessels, the remoter of which was rather dimly defined in the moonlight distance.

"Fully a mile away," replied Val, after another squint with the glass.

"Good, sir! I'd then advise to crack on all we've got at once. That will enable us to skin in betwixt them this side the Gate. And we ought to be able to take the ladies out of the ship and give her to the torch before the Cock gets her head around out of the tide-swirl—if nothing unforeseen perverts. I'll take the helm, if you say so."

"Do so!" replied Val, forthwith giving the necessary order for making all sail.

All the vessels were now well into East River, the foremost (which was the brigantine) being within six miles of Hell Gate, then a much more dangerous obstruction than at present, and only passable by large-sized vessels at all at high tide and with the most intelligent pilotage.

The breeze still favoring, the superb schooner shook out the glistening plumage of her white sails, and, obedient to the helm in Ringbolt's hands as an intelligent steed to the bridle-rein, began to overhaul the Perthshire hand over hand.

"What ship is that?" roared Captain Hiram Ferris, through his speaking-trumpet, when within hail.

"The Black Joker!" Captain Val returned answer, adding under his breath: "So you are once more your own skipper on your own deck, you old scoundrel! Well, we shall have a settlement before long, or I don't carry masked broadsides."

The old captain was one of a group, consisting of John Gabo, Caliban and several others, on the Perthshire's poop, all standing out quite distinctly in the moonlight, while the schooner's deck was darkened by the shadows of her fore-and-aft sails.

He seemed rather puzzled than alarmed, and presently called out again:

"Better keep aft of us! we can't go through the Gate abreast."

"We've other business on hand!" came the mocking reply.

And then, while the schooner was slipping past within biscuit-toss, her false ports disappeared and her double-shotted broadside was poured into the Perthshire's hull, while, as the smoke cleared off, the American flag was seen in the place of the Union Jack at her gaff.

Instantly there was the utmost confusion on the transport, while, with a ringing cheer from the privateer's crew, the Sprite rounded her bows with a long, graceful sweep, and the long stern-chaser sent in her iron compliments in a way that sent the ship's bowsprit into splinters.

"What in thunder are you?" roared Ferris, with a much stronger epithet. "Are'n't you making some mistake? This is a king's ship, blast your eyes!"

"And this is a Yankee privateer!" was the jeering response. "Luff there, Tom, and lay us aboard! Boarders to quarters!"

The boatswain's whistle screamed, and the privateer's deck was already black with men.

"What! Val Venture?" called out the old shipmaster, in an appalled tone, while John Gabo and Caliban could be seen encouraging the Perthshire's comparatively meager crew and distributing arms among them. "I thought you dead!"

Val's terrible laugh was the sole response, and now his mother and Mabel were seen for an in-

stant at the head of the companionway waving their handkerchiefs toward him.

"Boarders to the rail!" bellowed Ringbolt, relinquishing the helm to another hand and springing along the deck. "Grapple!"

But just as the capture of the Perthshire seemed a foregone conclusion there came a round-shot plowing along her starboard rail, killing three men, and the Gamecock was seen heading back from the Gate, out of whose jaws she had plucked her nose at the critical moment, while an unsuspected British battery on the Long Island shore began to open fire upon the schooner simultaneously.

CHAPTER XXII.

BAFFLED.

"LAY her aboard!" yelled Val, undismayed, even at this unexpected discouragement. "Five minutes ought to do our business."

And he also rushed to head the boarders, sword in hand.

But five minutes are a highly appreciative time-qualification in a sea-fight, and these were not accorded our young privateersman for the fulfillment of his battle-plan.

The monster, Caliban, was defending the threatened rail of the Perthshire almost single-handed, but with an energy that had already rolled back the first onset from the schooner's deck, while another shot and yet another came raking along the latter with terrible effect from the bow-gun of the fast-approaching brigantine.

Wielding an enormous iron-tipped handspike, in comparison with which an ordinary capstan-bar was but a straw, the uncouth giant was especially terrible; while John Gabo was at his side, pistol in hand, and the old shipmaster, a brave man, in spite of his perfidiousness, was cheering forward the remainder of the Perthshire's scanty crew with voice and example.

"Once more!" shouted Val, leading a second rush of his boarders. "Upon them, my hearties!"

But the attempt was again unsuccessful, notwithstanding that Caliban was at this juncture sent reeling back by a huge block of wood hurled in his face with stunning effect by the second mate, Mr. Dunbar.

Another between-shot from the Gamecock's bow-chaser stripped away the grapnels as clean as a whistle, besides mowing down a whole row of the schooner's bravos; and, just as Val caught a last glimpse of his mother and Mabel, on the point of being violently thrust down the Perthshire's companionway by Captain Ferris, the two vessels swung apart.

Then the Perthshire was the first to catch a freshening gust that swept her still further out of reach; the brigantine was almost between, with two-thirds of her guns in play, while the shore-battery redoubled its fire upon the schooner.

The truth was reluctantly forced upon Captain Val that his last chance for cutting out the Perthshire in that quarter was gone; while he was painfully alive to the fact that six of his men were slain outright, and seventeen badly wounded.

"Wear ship!" he shouted, grinding his teeth. "Mr. Ringbolt, look after those wounded men! Mr. Dunbar, bring the vessel about! Mr. Maltby, let go with the stern-chaser! Our game is up for the present!"

It was a humiliating admission to make, even in the face of those irresistible odds, but even Ringbolt, who had fought like a tiger in the consciousness that he was more or less under the observation of the handsome widow, had to confess that nothing more could be done.

However, the Spray Sprite was practically uninjured, and the beautiful, ready manner in which she wore around, and brought her Long Tom into play with such effectiveness that in less than five minutes the guns of the brigantine were silenced, while the shore-battery was as quickly out of range, was some consolation for the actual and disastrous failure of the main object of her attack.

She was nearly off her second tack in the retreat when the young privateer commander himself sighted the stern-chaser for a farewell shot.

Ringbolt himself had helped to load her this time, and then for an instant the long, polished brass piece was silent in the moonlight as Captain Val ran his glance along the sights, with the adjusting lever in his hands.

Bang went the piece! and then the thirty-two-pound round shot was seen to skip the waves an instant just before bringing the brigantine's entire foremast by the board, short at the deck.

A ringing cheer went up from the privateer, but the brigantine was still too closely under the lee of the shore battery to be attacked at close quarters; and by this time the Perthshire could be seen already more than half through the swirling waters of the Gate.

By this time, too, the wind began to shift, so that the Sprite was enabled to retrace her way down the Sound at a superb burst of sailing speed.

An hour later, when the wounded had re-

ceived the best attention that was available, Ringbolt came into the cabin where Captain Val was seated with a chart before him under the lamp.

The latter looked up collectedly.

"Try a pull at the decanter yonder, old messmate," he advised. "No wonder you look done up, with the devil's own luck that we've had. But we're free to try it again on the blue water, instead of in this accursed land-locked hole!"

The old sea-dog silently poured himself out and drank off a large glassful of the spirits, and then seated himself at the opposite side of the table, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

"That's just it!" he blurted out, after a moody pause. "Sea-room for a fight, or none at all! That's your music, Captain Val. However, we were too hasty this evening. Had we waited till the brigantine was well within the clutches of the Gate, the other one would have been at our mercy."

"Like enough," dryly. "But this fact won't help us out now."

"No, no! May I ax what is the next racket, sir?"

"Certainly. We shall merely stop long enough to put our wounded ashore at New London, and then round Montauk, to intercept the Perthshire and her consort on their way out to sea, by the Narrows."

"We've men enough to stop at Norwalk, too, for that matter, and give the whole cursed village to the flames."

"Not to be thought of! Do you forget that at least two-thirds of the villagers are our friends? Besides, we can't risk the delay."

"That is true."

"Then you must also remember that it behooves us especially to intercept the Perthshire before Gabo and Caliban can have an opportunity to put their piratical plot into practice. Otherwise, we shall be apt to find my mother and Mabel missing."

"True again! You think of everything; while that pirate business had already escaped my mind for the moment. But we'll also have to look out for the blockading fleet."

"So will Gabo and Caliban."

"Ah!"

"You see, that will make our task all the more delicate. Of course, they will only venture upon their infernal plot when well out in blue water, but how far out? That is the question. The repairs to the brigantine will keep her at least three days in New York Harbor, which will enable us to get well around Montauk, so as to lie in wait just outside the blockading line, say fifty miles off Sandy Hook. That ought to make us about right for waylaying our special pair on their way out."

"Sartain! And this time we'll attack the Gamecock first, eh?"

"Of course. The brigantine disposed of, we can overhaul the ship at our leisure."

"That's the storm-whistle for me!" cried Ringbolt, filling himself a fresh bumper. "I say, Cap, this is prime brandy!"

"Drink hearty, then, messmate! you know I seldom do at all."

Ringbolt was about to make another unimportant remark, probably anent the discolorateness of drinking alone, or something of the sort, when an alarming idea suddenly seemed to strike him.

"Hallo!" he growled, finishing off his glass with a sort of a glare; "why did I never think of that before!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Val!

"Messmate!"

"Yes, my hear y!"

"I'm squall-struck—a regular beam-ender!"

"What is it?"

"Suppose Caliban and Gabo should succeed in their pirating-plot afore we could take an intermeddlin' hand, you know?"

"Yes," with a troubled look. "I've already thought of that."

"Possible, you know?" uneasily.

"Anything is possible in a sea-way, Ringbolt."

The latter placed both elbows on the table, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper.

"In that case," he went on, "Caliban would doubtless carry off Mistress Mabel, your sweetheart, with him. Eh, messmate?"

Val could only nod, while striving to appear firm under the ugly suggestion.

"Well, then," Ringbolt's whisper was yet lower and more awe-stricken, "what of the beautiful widow, your mother, messmate?"

Captain Val started, his hand clinching convulsively.

"She—she would share a similar fate, I fear!" he almost sobbed through his powerful compressed lips.

"But the monster, Caliban, ain't in love with her, too, messmate?"

Val seemed to struggle for breath.

"No," he gasped, "but, if you must have it, I fear that John Gabo is, my friend!"

Ringbolt started to his feet with a maddened oath.

"You can't mean it!" he roared. "That

Portuguese hound, that sea-salamander, sweet on the widder—my widder!"

"We'll change the subject, if you please!" cried Val, likewise in a rage. "I only know that it occasionally struck me when I was a boy that John Gabo was secretly fonder of my mother than he seemed willing to let Captain Hiram suspect. No more of it, I tell you!" fiercely.

And then Val, likewise, helped himself to the brandy, though staring, and began pacing the cabin like a young tiger newly caged.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CRUISE FOR VENGEANCE.

RINGBOLT waited in silence until the young commander had resumed his seat, and then, with a new and terrible resolve in his grim, storm-seamed face, he stretched his knotted hand, palm upward, across the table.

"Comrade!" he said, in a strangely intense tone; "messmate!"

"Well?" and Val looked up, having by this time recovered his composure.

"Between us two privately, this cruise of the Spray Sprite is to be a cruise of what?"

Val started, a sympathetic frown gathering upon his frank, open brow.

"A cruise," he replied, slowly, "of rescue, or of vengeance!"

"Right! Put it there, messmate!"

The two palms came together with a close, wringing clasp.

It was a compact.

"Eight bells!" muttered Ringbolt, with a glance at the cabin clock, which was close upon the midnight hour.

And, without another word being exchanged, he went on deck to relieve Dunbar's watch.

Captain Val again paced the cabin in wearied and troubled thought, and then, feeling completely exhausted, turned in.

Awaking soon after daybreak, the vessel was rolling and pitching violently, and he hurried upon deck.

The weather had changed, and they were in the midst of a severe blow, which seemed to presage a great mid-summer gale from the south-east.

"Where are we?" he demanded, straining his eyes through the spray-mist over the port-rail.

"Off Black Point, sir," replied Ringbolt, who was still on watch. "With this gale, we shall make New London inside of two hours."

"Excellent!" and Val rubbed his hands contentedly.

The depression of the preceding night had worn away, and he was his brave, fearless and adventurous self once more.

Ringbolt pointed to the wild sky seaward, whose ragged and unquiet clouds seemed to be licked by the leaping and tumultuous waves.

"Nastier coming, sir."

"So much the better!"

"Ay; I knowed you would say so," with a quiet exultation of tone. "Good for us, but nasty for the blockading fleet! Eh, sir?"

"That is just it! Let the gale hold until we round Montauk. I ask for nothing better. With this wind in our wings we can be down among 'em, and in and out of 'em at will, like a sea-bird among a flock of crows and geese."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"That is well!" continued Val, with a glance at the carpenter and his assistants, who were busy at repairing work along the starboard rail and elsewhere. "Those raking round shots did us less damage than I expected."

"We'll be shipshape afore noon, sir. I knowed you wouldn't want to lie over at New London longer than to transfer our wounded to the military hospital."

"How many will there be?"

"Twelve; the surgeon says the rest will do on board."

No mention was made of the slain, the poor dead bodies that were also to be put ashore.

Val went down into the cockpit, where the Spray Sprite's surgeon—a capable and staunch little Scotchman, of patriotic devotion to the American cause, whose services had been secured at New London—was busy with the wounded men.

"Aweel, aweel, sir," said Doctor Mackenzie, in answer to a general question; "it's bad eno', though it might ha' been waur'. There," pointing to the pallets on which the worst cases lay, "be the twal' that wi' ha'e to go ashore."

Val passed among the sufferers, giving such consolation and encouragement as lay in soothing and hopeful words.

As he was about quitting the compartment, a young fellow with his head done up in numerous bloody bandages, plucked him by the sleeve.

"Thank God, sir, I am one of those to remain on board!" he said, as the young commander bent sympathetically over him. "That may give me another shy at him."

"Ah, it's you, Jack!" returned Val, recognizing the speaker at last as one of his original recruits, Jack Mabie, a brave and likely young seaman from Fairfield. "Yes; we shall all have many another chance at the accursed Britishers, I trust."

"But I spoke of him especially, sir."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Caliban!" and the sufferer ground his teeth. "One of the four men whom he smashed to death on Ram's Island was my only brother, captain."

"True: I remember now."

"Since then," Mabie went on, "my mother has died of a broken heart. Oh, sir! God is too fair and just not to give me another chance at the monster. My bullet would have reached his black heart last night but for the block of wood in the face that sent him reeling back."

Val bowed his head, and, as he quitted the place, such of the sufferers as were able gave him a parting cheer.

After the wounded had been transferred to the hospital at New London, General Parsons endeavored to dissuade Val from putting to sea at once, by reason of the approaching tempest, no less than of certain reports of an unusual collection of British war-ships cruising in the vicinity of Block Island and thereabouts.

But the fiery young privateersman would not listen to the proposition.

"The letter-of-marque Spray Sprite is afloat to fight," he answered, shortly. "And fight she will in all weathers, while a plank or rope remains, until the independence of our common country is secured!"

He accordingly only waited long enough to recruit twenty men, who were found anxious to try their fortunes in the bold privateer, and then got under way for the open sea by the wan light of a stormy moon.

Dawn of the following day found the Spray Sprite scudding under all but bare poles midway between Block Island and Montauk Point, amid the fury of a southeast storm that few other vessels of her size and build could have ridden out in safety.

The misty gloom of the early dawn was just beginning to give way to a more certain light, when there was a flash to windward, a cannon-boom above the roaring of the waves and the shrieking of the gale, and then the schooner's lantern was snuffed out like magic by a round shot passing between the foretop-gallant stays.

"Ship ahead!" simultaneously bawled out the lookout. "Good Lord! she's right on top of us."

Captain Val and Mr. Dunbar were on the quarter-deck, and, as they turned their eyes windward, it was perceived that the warning was but little exaggerated.

The shadowy bulk of a mighty frigate, with the smoke of her bow-gun, which had delivered the shot, still wreathing in the wind, was poised on the summit of a tremendous wave, apparently in readiness to crash down upon the schooner at the next instant.

"Luff, there, luff!" shouted Captain Val, springing at his helmsman's side, and snatching his trumpet to his lips. "Let go the foresail! Stand by, stand by! Bring her about! There we go!"

And, these orders being executed with marvelous precision and dexterity, the schooner glided out of the sea-trough like a thing of life, kicking up her stern saucily at the next rise almost under the leviathan's nose, as the latter came down with a swash that sent the spray flying in sheets.

"What ship is that?" was roared from the frigate's poop.

"A pretty question to ask after that round-shot!" cried Val, in a rage. "All ready, Mr. Maltby?"

"All right, sir!" was the master-gunner's response.

"Give him the answer he deserves, then!"

Then the schooner's stern-chaser spoke, with the clear, brassy ring peculiar to its material, and, just as the succeeding wave was crested, the splinters were seen to fly from a splendidly-planted shot square in the monster's fore-chains.

"Stand out, and explain, or we'll sink you with a broadside!" bellowed the frigate's commander, apparently in a towering rage.

"Thanks, my lord!" Val responded, with a light laugh; "but we're not through standing in yet."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SEA TERROR.

THEN, almost with a simultaneous flash and thunder-roll, followed the frigate's tremendous broadside of twenty-two guns from both decks, but, as the schooner at the same instant dipped almost out of sight in the trough of the sea, the entire discharge went hurtling harmlessly far over her tops.

An instant later, the Sprite began to climb an enormous wave, while the Britisher went into the corresponding hollow.

Crash! went the Long Tom again, her discharge this time fairly raking the monster's crowded spar-deck fore and aft, with splendid execution; and, before the double-decker could get about for the delivery of another broadside, the Sprite, feathering off in the gale like a dry leaf before a gust, was dancing the crests more than half a mile away, in scorn of the armament that could have fairly pulverized her in anything like a smoother sea.

Two farewell shots were delivered from her stern-chaser, each with effect, and then she was

up and away on the southwest with an ease and celerity that could safely laugh at pursuit.

It was a memorable gale for the mid-summer season.

It lasted almost uninterruptedly, though with fluctuating force, for two days and two nights.

During this time, the Spray Sprite was in and out of the blockading and transport fleet off the eastern end of Long Island, like a veritable sea-nightmare or witch of the waves; buoyant as a feather, unsinkable as a cork, swift-winged as a petrel, adventurous as an eagle, popping away right and left among the laboring frigates, corvettes and sloop-of-war, only to be away again amid the spume and spray of the wild seas, a rising and vanishing phantom of destruction or defiance, as the case might be, or the chance might serve.

She became a sea terror.

Without counting her numerous daring brushes with war ships many times her superior in fighting weight, two transports, sent to the bottom, and four smaller store-ships, deep-laden with provisions from Boston and Nova Scotia, given to the flames, were the sum of her successes before the great storm blew itself out, only to discover that she had vanished as mysteriously as she had appeared, leaving wrath, ruin and despair in her spectral track.

The entire crew of one of the two transports thus summarily dealt with were unavoidably lost with their vessel, it being impossible to afford succor by reason of the furious seas. The other ship's company was rescued from a similar fate by a sloop-of-war which happened in at the death, the Sprite purposely avoiding any interruption of the humane proceeding. But the entire crews of the shore-ships, thirty-two in number, were taken on board the privateer. Of these, twenty-seven were American or Nova Scotian seamen, compulsorily in the British service, who were eager to join fortunes with the victorious Americans.

The remaining five were put on shore at South Hampton, under parole, at the first opportunity, after which, the Spray Sprite spread her wings for the vicinity of Sandy Hook, in the fulfillment of the dearest wish of her young commander, which was now to lie in wait for the Perthshire and the beloved ones virtually held as captives therein.

It was under superb auspices that the bold privateer now proceeded on this *con amore* mission on the flashing trail-ends of the abating tempest.

According to the reports of her new recruits, she was already become a name for terror and destruction along the immediate coast, together with a reputation for invincible cunning and good-luck that could be scarcely less effective than actual achievement in the superstitions of sea-faring men. Added to this, the privateer was now fairly overrunning with men, having a crew of one hundred and forty, three-fourths of whom were able seamen, with a sufficient ingredient of the desperateness of character which, when kept within disciplinary bounds, is such a powerful attribute with a free-fighting ship; her selection from the stores falling under her command had rendered her magnificently provisioned, both with subsistent and war material, for a long and varied cruise; while, perhaps, best of all, the majority of the crew were already imbued with that blind and trusting faith in the schooner's luck which no temporary disaster or ordinary quiescence of prestige was likely to dampen or change.

For three days the Spray Sprite hovered outside Sandy Hook, like a sea-hound in wait for expectant prey, with variable winds, but with no more exciting adventure than to occasionally show her light heels to some pursuing frigate with a witchlike celerity, perhaps punctuated by a shot or two from her redoubtable Long Tom, that was sufficiently convincing of the futility of any attempt to overhaul her.

On the morning of the fourth day, however, when about fifty miles outside the Hook, two sails were sighted outward bound, which were not long in exciting special interest on the part of both Captain Val and Tom Ringbolt.

"One of 'em has the true brigantine cut!" eagerly exclaimed Ringbolt at last, with his glass leveled. "And t'other, though a trifle undersized for the Perthshire's topsail, must be more'n five miles further away."

Val nodded, and continued to scrutinize the strangers through his own telescope for some seconds.

When he lowered it, his eyes were fairly dancing in his head.

"The one is a brigantine beyond question!" he assented at last. "The other is too far off to speculate on, but we'll soon have a nearer glimpse."

"Supposing they're our game, sir?"

"Well?"

"Are we too far within the blockading line to tackle 'em at once?"

"We'll tackle them where we find them, if it is in the heart of the whole British Navy!" replied the young commander, energetically.

Ringbolt leveled his glass once more, with one of his self-satisfied chuckles.

The schooner's course was at once altered so

as to intercept the strangers, and, with a fair westerly wind on her quarter, she was soon rapidly lessening the interval.

As the foremost stranger became more distinctly outlined, the fact of her brigantine rig and build became more and more pronounced.

This strengthened the hope that she might prove the Gamecock, with the longed-for Perthshire in convoy, for the hermaphrodite brig was something of a marine novelty in those waters at that period.

But, as the Spray Sprite drew nearer, without making any secret of her hostile intentions, the brigantine in this instance took to flight, while the smaller vessel came straight on, and speedily materialized into a full-rigged, stanch sloop-of-war, probably of eight or ten guns, and with the British Union Jack saucily apparent.

"It's an odd mistake," growled Captain Val. "But we're fairly in for it."

The schooner was accordingly put in chase to cut out the brig, while playing out shot after shot from her stern-chaser, to discourage the sloop from intermeddling, if possible.

But the sloop-of-war, unfortunately, proved to be an exceptionally fast sailer, and but little the privateer's inferior in this regard.

Accordingly, when the transport was overhauled after an exciting chase of four hours, her consort was but five miles astern of the Spray Sprite, with a very decided air of taking a hand in the business with a preponderance of iron argument not a little to the latter's disadvantage.

But a shot across the brig's bows had already brought her to, the privateer's decks were cleared for action, and her boats in readiness for boarding.

A heavy swell was running, which would prevent the Sprite from laying her prospective prize aboard, as she might otherwise have done toward expediting matters.

"Mr. Dunbar, take charge of the long-boat," called out Captain Val. "Mr. Maltby, the cutter is your command. Lower away!"

Crowded with fighting-men, both boats were speedily on their way to the brig, while the schooner rounded in within hail, but with a sharp weather-eye on the sloop-of-war, which was now coming down on the wind, a pyramid of towering canvas, and with her bow-guns spitting fire every five minutes; though as yet their shots fell short, while the schooner's Long Tom, in spite of the distance, was beginning to make the splinters fly under McIntosh's splendid gunnery.

"Do you surrender?" bawled out Captain Val, just as the brig's name, Norfolk, was made out upon her stern.

"Not by a darned sight!" was thundered back with an oath, by the chief officer on her poop.

And at the same time her single carronade with which she was armed let fly a shell that went screaming over the privateer's quarters.

"Let her have her dose, then!" cried Val.

Almost instantly the privateer, which was feathering the crests like a thing of life, began to empty her guns with tremendous effect.

First the bow-chaser spoke, bringing down the transport's main topmast with a run. Her Long Tom let fly almost at the same instant, raking the on-coming sloop, now but two miles distant, fore and aft. And the smoke of these explosions had scarcely cleared before the two twenty-four pounders of her port broadside poured their pills into the brig's quarter, knocking her carronade end-wise, and at the same time covering the movements of the boarding boats, whose crews were seen the next instant to make fast and swarm up the brig's side with a fighting-yell.

"Are there enough for the job?" anxiously inquired Val, of Ringbolt, while both were peering through the smoke as the broadside was repeated, this time with the effect of wrecking the brig's bowsprit.

"Yes, sir!" was the response, after a critical pause.

"Has she struck?"

"Yes; and she's on fire!"

This was the truth, and, amid a sudden vomiting of smoke and flame from the transport's midships, the boarders could be seen clearing her decks with a victorious hand-to-hand rush, while her union was down as a signal of her surrender.

Then there was a tremendous broadside from the sloop-of-war, and the Sprite's foretopmast was down, while Ringbolt had just time to snatch the wheel from a poor fellow whose head had been carried away by a round-shot.

"Lay her aboard!" bellowed Val. "She has too much iron for us. Boarders to the fore!"

A moment later privateer and war sloop were side by side, and there was a desperate fight along the scraping sides to see which should board the other.

Fortunately for the Spray Sprite, the sloop was short-handed; and, after a tremendous grapple, the ninety-odd available boarders from her decks—sea-bravos, every man of them, and with Val and Ringbolt in their lead—were over the man-o'-war's rail, like so many wolves upon their prey.

For ten minutes the fiercest of hand-to-hand battles ebbed and flowed along the single-

decker's planks, fore and aft; the contestants being too inextricably blended for the use of shrapnel on the part of the Britisher, which might otherwise have decided the victory in her favor.

Then the lieutenant in command went down, with a pistol-ball through his head, and while Val was crossing swords with the second officer, one of the magazines on the after-deck blew up with a tremendous shock, killing and maiming at least a score of the sloop's defenders.

The second officer staggered back, with a deep thrust in his shoulder, and held out his left hand with an unmistakable gesture.

Val stayed his sword-arm; a final rush on the part of the privateersmen, with Ringbolt at their head, carried everything before it; the British flag was down; and the Vampire sloop-of-war was the Spray Sprite's prize.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DEAR-BOUGHT VICTORY.

THE officer who made the formal surrender of the Vampire to Captain Val was Mr. Kingston, her second lieutenant, who had assumed the chief command on the death of his superior officer.

"Sir," said he, bitterly, in yielding up his sword at the close of the bloody deck-fight, "it is humiliating in the last degree to yield me to a smaller ship, and a privateer at that. And, but for our being so short-handed, the conditions might well have been reversed. We had but sixty men at the outset, our complement having been thus reduced by manning numerous prizes heretofore taken."

"You've done your best, sir; and no man can do more than that," was the gallant response. "Oblige me by receiving back your sword, and retaining it on parole."

But the sloop was now on fire, the dead and dying of both sides littered her decks; and, added to this, the privateer was considerably crippled through the loss of her topmast, to say nothing of twelve men killed and sixteen wounded on the part of her fighting force; the Vampire having sustained about an equal loss in this respect.

When the conflagration on board the latter had been extinguished, with but little material damage, a survey of the general condition of affairs revealed unexpected results.

In the first place, the captured transport, now about two miles away, was wreathed in flames, and the victorious boats' crew were putting back slowly to the privateer with such prisoners and valuables as they had been able to snatch from the doomed brig, though her destruction had been accomplished without the loss of a man on their part.

Then, about five miles to windward, and sheeting merrily out to sea, two vessels were observed whose appearance at once struck both Val and Ringbolt with a keen sense of disappointment.

They were both on the poop of the captured sloop-of-war, together with Mr. Kingston and other prisoners, at the time of making this discovery; the work of clearing decks of both vessels and taking care of the wounded being in active progress around them.

"Do you recognize those ships, sir?" demanded the young commander of his chief prisoner-of-war.

"Certainly," replied the latter. "They were to have quitted New York Harbor shortly after we weighed anchor. They are the ship Perthshire and the armed brigantine Gamecock, bound for the mother country."

"I knowed it!" growled Ringbolt, with a furious glare to seaward. "We've tricked ourselves, and this fight, glorious as it has been, has cheated us out of our longed-for prey."

"It is a bitter disappointment, but we must make the best of it," Val said to him, in a low voice. "Get the Sprite into sailing shape with the least possible delay. We may yet be on the Perthshire's track in time to overhaul her."

It was hoped that the Gamecock would make an attempt to recapture the sloop, but this was not realized.

By the time the Vampire was sent off under a prize crew, with the survivors of her whilom officers and men on board as prisoners of war, and the Spray Sprite's wrecked topmast had been replaced, night was beginning to close in over the deep, and the fugitives had long melted away into the eastern horizon.

The schooner was, nevertheless, laid in pursuit, and, everything considered, there was still a chance that a couple of days of her peerless sailing might once more bring the ship and brigantine in sight.

Of the twelve prisoners taken from the Norfolk four were Americans who had gladly availed themselves of the opportunity to become part of the privateer's crew.

One of these was a Mr. Jonesby, from down in Maine, who had been pressed into the British service on Staten Island, and was the sailing-master on board the Norfolk at the time of her capture.

He was an intelligent and able seaman, from whose conversation Val and Ringbolt were enabled to draw no little comfort.

"I doubt if the Vampire would have ventured to attack you," he said, "if her commander had suspected you of being what you are."

"Our schooner's fame must have gone before her not a little, then?" observed Val, smiling.

"Well, I should say so! The Spray Sprite is already looked upon as a sort of sea-devil, with little less than a charmed life. Apart from our Paul Jones, who is already becoming so famous across the water, I doubt if the Continental fleet contains three frigates whose combined fighting strength is now held so much in dread by the British shipping in these waters as your privateer. It is a pleasure and an honor for a true American to be one of your dare-devil crew."

And then Mr. Jonesby hobnobbed with Ringbolt, and was yet more expansively informative, especially with what he had been able to learn of army operations.

"But what do you know about the Perthshire and the Gamecock?" cried Ringbolt, at last. "Blast the luck! if we hadn't fallen in with you we might have intercepted both of 'em long afore this. And I reckon Lord Rathspey would have found different work with us out here in the open than in the East River."

"Your fight at Hell Gate has been the wondering talk of the town and garrison ever since," said Jonesby. "I know nothing more than that the Perthshire and Gamecock were fitting up in haste for their voyage while we were getting ready."

For three days and nights the Spray Sprite held her course without sighting a single sail.

But on the morning of the fourth day, after a very thick night, a full-rigged ship was reported only ten miles away on the port bow.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BAFFLED AGAIN.

HALF an hour later Ringbolt awoke Captain Val in his berth.

His eyes were sparkling, his rough features animated with excitement.

"It's the Perthshire at last, sir!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands.

The young commander was out of his bunk in a twinkling.

"Are you sure?" he cried, while hurriedly assuming his garments.

"Dead to rights!" was the jubilant response. "She was sighted at daybreak, and we must have been slowly overhauling her by sheer luck through the night. Mr. Dunbar and I have been studying her ever since."

"And you make her out as Captain Hiram's ship beyond a doubt?"

"Sure as a gun, if there's any virtue in the cut of a jib."

"How about her consort?"

"There's nothing else in sight."

"That looks bad. Heaven forbid that Caliban shall have already accomplished his piratical intentions!"

Ringbolt scratched his head.

"I've turned that over in my thinker," he admitted. "But then, the pair of 'em may well have separated accidentally in the thick weather we've been having, sir."

"Hardly, with the steady, fair winds that have accompanied the fogs. Is the stranger making well, or as if short-handed?"

"Can't tell as yet, Cap, but we ought to overhaul her inside of three hours."

But as soon as Val reached the poop-deck, and recognized the stranger—then but six miles away—as the Perthshire beyond peradventure, his face grew anxious.

"That ship is short-handed, and in distress!" he exclaimed. "Crack on everything, Mr. Dunbar, and be ready to lower away with the long-boat!"

As the intervening distance between the two vessels was lessened, it was perceived that there was evidently some mystery about the ship.

Not only did she seem to make no effort to escape, but she remained shortened in sail, and there were even no signs of life on board of her.

Running up close, Val hailed, but without eliciting the least response.

"Lower away!" he shouted, with a secret fear at heart.

And then it was with a feeling of uneasiness, which they did not attempt to disguise from each other, that Ringbolt and he accompanied the long-boat in her passage to the silent ship.

The breeze had somewhat stiffened, so that considerable of a swell was on.

Mr. Dunbar was left on the schooner's poop, and had his glass leveled at the Perthshire.

Just as the Sprite's rising on an exceptionally tall swell gave him an uninterrupted view of the other's deck, he made a gesture, and called out to those in the long-boat just as the latter began to pull away:

"Good God! there's ill-luck in that ship. She's full of murdered men!"

The boat's crew were not long in having a terrible realization of this report.

As soon as they clambered over the ship's side a terrible spectacle presented itself.

Her deck was literally running red with blood, which could not have long been spilled; the bodies of murdered men were scattered everywhere; some with the appearance of having been slain in cold blood on the spot, others

as if they had been tossed aboard after being dispatched elsewhere.

The helm was lashed down taut, which, together with the shortened sails and the fair winds that had latterly prevailed, sufficiently accounted for the vessel having held her course unaided and without accident.

Not a live man in view; nothing but the bloody and staring corpses everywhere!

A ship of death, indeed!

However, as Val and Ringbolt, with such feelings of horror as can better be imagined than described, led the descent upon the gory deck, there was heard a faint sound, suggestive of a human cry, from the direction of the companionway.

"Come!" said Val, in a hoarse, unnatural voice. "Whatever else is in store for us, we must investigate."

Motioning the boat's crew to remain where they were, and accompanied only by Ringbolt, he picked his way among the dead bodies and approached the companionway.

The cabin entrance at the foot of the steps was shut and fastened, but the cry was repeated, and it unquestionably came from within.

Captain Val hesitated, and then struck the door sharply with his clinched hand.

"Who is it calls?" he cried.

Another inarticulate cry was the only answer.

"Here goes!" growled Ringbolt. "Be it ghost or human, messmate, we're bound to face the music."

With that, putting his stalwart shoulder to the door, he burst it in.

The cabin gave evidence of having been recently ransacked.

Two men were sitting, gagged and bound with cords to chairs, but were apparently otherwise uninjured.

These two men were Lord Rathspey and Captain Hiram Ferris.

It was the latter who had managed to emit the summoning cry, in spite of his gag.

Though speechless, the strained and rolling eyes of both were sufficiently eloquent of what they were suffering, and what they might be able to disclose.

The new-comers lost no time in relieving them of their bonds, and setting before them some water and wine, which Ringbolt discovered at the bottom of one of the lockers after a little rummaging.

After draining a glass of the refreshing liquor, with faintly-mumbled thanks, Lord Rathspey fell forward with his head on the table in a sort of swoon.

Captain Hiram, however, the tougher though the older of the two, after a similar draught, at once cried, in a hoarse but distinct voice:

"God be praised! He has not deserted us, though the instruments of his succor are those whom we foully wronged!" after which he fell to trembling convulsively, as if threatened with a fatal visitation.

"Call in two of the boat's crew," ordered Val. "The blood-circulation of these unhappy men must be restored by compulsory exercise of some sort, or they may die before telling us their pitiful story."

This was accordingly done, and, after the sufferers had been roughly walked and hustled about the saloon for a bit, they began to recover something of their normal condition.

Then Captain Val, after dismissing the sailors, sat down with Ringbolt at one side of the cabin table, and sternly commanded Rathspey and Ferris to take seats on the opposite side.

The two latter obeyed without a word of objection, though Lord Rathspey did so with a sort of dignity in his humiliation, which was altogether wanting in the old shipmaster, who seemed both shame-faced and surly.

"Your ship is a shambles," said Captain Val. "What is the meaning of this horror?"

Ferris made no response.

He uttered but one word, "Caliban!" and then smote the table with a gesture of anguish and despair.

"Ah! and he and Gabo are off in the Gamecock under the black flag?"

"Yes!" with a sort of moan, while Rathspey also bowed his head with an agonized groan.

"My mother and your daughter?" was the next question, forced out through the young man's compressed lips.

"Gone! both gone—taken away!"

Val burst into a maddened cry. Of course, the answer was no more than he had expected, but to be confronted with it in any shape was awful.

"Curse your perfidious soul!" he roared out. "You, Captain Ferris, are responsible for all this—you, with your perjury and hypocritical ways!"

"It is the truth, by Heaven!" thundered Ringbolt, as an echo of his young commander's rage. "Blast your gold-fastened gizzard, Captain Hiram! you are to blame—you only!"

The old man looked straight before him, speechless and with a stony look in his hollow eyes; while Lord Rathspey's lip quivered, and he moved uneasily in his seat.

"I can find some consolation for these consequences in that man's position," cried Val, pointing to Rathspey. "He may naturally have

deemed Mabel's love for me a passing fancy, which the years would rub away in his favor—and he had his own honest passion as an excuse. But as for you!" he turned upon the shipmaster with renewed fury; "on your head this loss and this horror lies!"

He would have said more, but at this moment the old man broke down, with a great and penitential wail.

"Oh, I know it!" he moaned. "Great God! can you think that I don't know it, Val Venture, or that my conscience will ever let me rest again! Hang me, draw and quarter me, bury me in the deep sea! but will that expiate my fault, my sin, my crime?"

And he sobbed like a little child.

Lord Rathspey lifted up his own stricken face, and they could not but see how haggard and appalled it had grown.

"Question me as you will," he brokenly interposed. "But respect the old man's gray hairs. His misery is sincere, though deserved."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WILD TALE OF THE SEA.

VAL's face had slightly softened, though only to grow hard again, while Ringbolt's had remained as pitiless as adamant.

"When did it begin?" he sternly demanded of Rathspey.

"Yesterday at noon," was the reply. "By sundown all was over."

"The particulars?"

"The vessels were less than a mile apart when, doubtless at a signal from Caliban, the mutiny started on both."

"It was speedily successful. Caliban was the master-spirit, with two-thirds of the crew secretly pledged to his plot."

"In ten minutes the ship here was in the possession of the mutineers, and every opposing man murdered, with the exception of Captain Ferris and myself."

"Then the Gamecock drew alongside. She had likewise been captured, but at the expense of much greater slaughter."

"Caliban's ringleader on board the brigantine was a Spaniard, or Portuguese, the Gamecock's master's mate, named Vargo."

"He was a splendid seaman, but a secret and forbidding man, whose desperate character I had more than suspected. But he had been recommended to me by our admiral in New York Harbor, and there was no choice but to take him."

"The bodies of those who had been murdered on the Gamecock were thrown upon the decks of this ship. Then the ladies, together with their personal effects, were transferred to the brigantine."

"This ship was also pillaged of such stores and valuables as excited the cupidity of the mutineers."

"A boat's crew was left on board, however, while the Gamecock sheered off."

"Caliban and Gabo stood on her poop, lifting their hats with mock deference to Captain Ferris and me. The ladies were weeping in each other's arms at their side."

"As the Gamecock sheered away we noticed that her name had been already painted over and replaced with the designation, Black Vulture, in huge yellow letters."

"At the same time she fired a salute, and the black flag, in place of the Union Jack, was run up at her gaff."

"This was shortly before dusk of last evening."

"Then Ferris and I were forced below here, and gagged and bound in the position you discovered us."

Such was the tale, wild and brief, of that awful tragedy of the sea.

"But you, Lord Rathspey," said Captain Val, after a solemn pause, "were personally in command of the brigantine?"

"I was, sir," was the grave response.

"How chanced it, then, that you were here on board the Perthshire at this critical period?"

"I came to dine with Captain Ferris and the ladies, at the former's invitation. When the vessels were near together, the interchange of such courtesies was frequent."

"So! And on this particular day your coming on board the Perthshire was doubtless the signal for the combined mutiny?"

"Undoubtedly. Unsuspecting of peril, we were seated at the midday meal, and both Gabo and Caliban had excused themselves from dining with us."

"Our first intimation of danger was a shot from the fore-castle."

"It was followed by other shots. We had hardly time to spring to our feet when the cabin was invaded by Caliban and Gabo, at the head of six men, armed to the teeth, and with the smell of murder fresh upon them."

"We were overpowered before we could so much as lift a hand."

"Caliban was for murdering Ferris and myself outright, without more ado, but, at the frantic supplication of your mother and Mistress Mabel, finally consented to spare our lives, on condition that the ladies should accompany the criminal father and son as 'their honored guests.'"

"What could we do? With our blood additionally upon the scoundrel's hands, the fate of the unhappy ladies might have been yet more deplorable."

"As for myself, I cared nothing for the life that was granted me. You may not believe me, Captain Venture, but it is none the less true that I would have cheerfully yielded it over and over again for the privilege of restoring them to your protection on the Connecticut ground, from which I had consented, in an hour of passionate weakness, to tear them away against their will."

"The sin of my injustice had found me out. Too late did I make the discovery—too late, too late!"

There was the earnestness of truth and contrition in the man's broken words, in the lines of his haggard and conscience-stricken face.

"That is all," he continued. "The ladies submitted to their fate with such resignation as they could summon up."

"It is but just to say that their blood-stained captors treated them with profound respectfulness, which, however, did not lessen their fell determination in the least."

"The ladies were even permitted to take their own time in packing up their wardrobes and otherwise preparing for the transfer, though kept under constant and jealous guard."

Ringbolt had drawn his cutlass from its sheath in his belt, and was drawing lines with its point upon the cabin floor, while casting stern and sinister glances now and then at both Captain Hiram and Lord Rathspey.

Captain Val placed his hand on the veteran's shoulder, gave him a cautioning glance, and then arose.

"Which," he demanded, "were the quarters occupied by my mother and Mistress Mabel?"

Lord Rathspey silently indicated a passage-entrance, concealed by some rich hangings, and the young man passed into it without a word.

The cabin which had been occupied jointly by Mistress Venture and Mabel was in a sadly disordered condition, indicative of the trembling haste in which they had been deserted.

But after a careful and anxious search among the lockers, Val discovered the following notes, hastily written in pencil, and addressed to himself:

"VAL, MY LOVER!" one of them ran in Mabel's well remembered handwriting. "Should this chance to meet your gaze, do not despair. Heaven will protect me, and in any case I shall be true to love, to honor and to you. Though I am now in Caliban's power, I feel instinctively that I can influence him to respect me, no less than your dear mother, even in the midst of his crimes. Hope, Val, hope! I can say no more. My father sees his error, now that it is too late; and I am sure that Lord Rathspey has been rather misled than wicked. Good-by, my lover, good-by! Heaven put you upon our track! God help us all!"

The other scrawl was in the Widow Venture's writing, to the following effect:

"MY SON:—Something tells me that this message will somehow reach your hands. Val, my beloved boy, bitter misfortune is come upon your unhappy mother, but she resigns herself to the will of Heaven. Cease not to hunt the world over for us in your splendid schooner. My love for brave Mr. Ringbolt, and my love and prayers for yourself!"

"MOTHER."

Val called Ringbolt into the cabin, and placed his mother's letter in his hands.

"She sends me her love—me!" muttered the old fellow, hoarsely, after deciphering the words. "Not her regards, but her love! Shiver my planks!" with a half-choking sense of satisfaction; "if that ain't the very word in black and white!"

"Of course it is."

Val took back the poor scrawl, and, together with Mabel's, put it away in his bosom. Then he held out his hand.

"Messmate," he said, "the world of waters is wide and wide, but—but we shall yet effect their rescue!"

"Or die of old age in the attempt!" cried Ringbolt, striking hands on the compact, with an oath not loud but deep. "Come, then! our first duty is one of blood and near at hand."

With that he once more drew his cutlass and rushed back into the adjoining saloon.

Val followed, and only just in time to save the old shipmaster, whom the enraged Ringbolt had forthwith sprung upon with murderous intent.

"Stand from between us!" thundered the old sailor, as both Val and Rathspey interposed, the former with drawn sword. "His life's forfeit! The Widow Venture's honor must be avenged!"

It was only after Val had succeeded in beating him back by superior swordsmanship that the old fellow desisted from his murderous design.

"All right!" he growled, putting up his weapon, and spitting upon his hands. "I see what you're up to, Captain Val. You'd save 'em for the yard-arm. Dash my top lights, but I'm with you!"

"There's been bloodshed enough here in all conscience," replied Val, impressively. "Certainly, under my authority there will be no more. Tumble up with you, Ringbolt, and signal for another boat's crew on the spot. This

ship is our prize, and we must get her in shape for transmission to France with the least possible delay."

Ringbolt rather sullenly obeyed, and Val turned to the miserable pair.

"You are my prisoners," he said, curtly, "but I forego my just vengeance upon you on certain conditions. Come on deck!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A LONG CRUISE.

BY sunset of that same day the Perthshire, cleansed, refitted, and with her silent, staring witnesses of the tragedy that had been enacted on her ill-omened decks consigned, with rude but appropriate burial services, to the bosom of the deep, was in readiness to proceed to France under the direction of a prize crew from among the privateer's ship's company, and with Lord Rathspey and Captain Hiram Ferris as passengers.

The individuals named were under pledge to lend such services as might be called for in the navigation of the vessel, and, furthermore, were on their parole of honor as prisoners-of-war.

Such were the lenient conditions, cheerfully subscribed to by them, under which Captain Val Venture, of the Spray Sprite, had consented, much to Ringbolt's secret dissatisfaction, to forego his righteous vengeance upon their guilty but repentant heads.

A prize crew, however, had only been secured after much difficulty, the Perthshire being naturally regarded with superstitious dread, by reason of her tragic experience.

She was, nevertheless, a fairly rich prize, and, both Rathspey and Ferris being experienced navigators, in addition to the young sailor placed in command, there was every reason to hope that she would duly reach her destined port, and be disposed of to the best advantage.

This was to be Brest, La Rochelle, or Bayonne, according to circumstances, France being at this time on the verge of war with England, by reason of her speedily-growing sympathies with the Americans.

Captain Val would have avoided a formal parting with Rathspey and Ferris, but could not do so very well.

"Captain Venture," said the former when the stiff adieu had been exchanged, "I wish you to understand that henceforth I have but one remaining object in life. You will not be alone in your pursuit of the foul pirate, Caliban. Britisher as I am, my part in the war against your gallant and struggling people is at an end. My dearest hope is to command, at the earliest opportunity, a vessel of my own in order to hunt the criminal down, and with the chief object of restoring Mistress Ferris to the man of her heart—yourself—and Mistress Venture to her gallant son's protecting arms. That object achieved, should you not be beforehand with me in the rescue, I shall consider the purpose of my existence attained; for I am otherwise a broken and hopeless man."

He was evidently profoundly in earnest, and the words were both manly and modest.

Ferris took no part in the interview. He had aged rapidly, and, with his crushed, mechanical air, it was sufficiently obvious that, with the crowning and retributive misfortune he had sustained, his worldly dream was at an end.

Val made a cold but fitting acknowledgment to what had been said.

The vessels then separated, the privateer taking a southeasterly course, such having been chosen by the new-fledged corsair, after her baptism of murder, and the Perthshire filling away for the coast of France.

For four months the Spray Sprite continued her havoc among the British merchant marine of the North Atlantic, capturing or destroying numerous prizes, and often apparently on the near track of the Vulture, but never so much as sighting her.

She increased her own reputation as a terror of the seas, but without a tangible trace of that pirate ensign, that both Ringbolt and Val so hungered to come within range of, other than the indiscriminate destruction left in her remorseless wake.

At last, however, in the neighborhood of the Canary Islands, some indication of the pirate's whereabouts was come upon.

A Portuguese ship was boarded which had fallen in with the Black Vulture three days previously, and had been spared, unpillaged, by reason of her nationality.

From a conversation with the captain of this vessel, a rough and honest seaman from Oporto, much was learned.

"I gave myself up for lost," he said to Val, "when the brigantine brought me under her guns, with that horrible black flag flaunting from her peak. But both Captain Caliban and his first mate, Mr. Gabo, were very complacent when they discovered that I was Portuguese, and they even insisted that I should dine with them."

This interview took place in the Spray Sprite's cabin, Ringbolt being also present.

"You did dine with the pirates, then?" demanded Val, eagerly.

"Oh, yes, señor, and of the best!" replied the Portuguese skipper, whose name was Lasquinez.

"And I was deuced happy to get off so easily, I can tell you."

Both Val and Ringbolt were all eagerness, but masked their personal feelings to the best of their ability.

"Then the pirates appeared to be living well?" said the former.

"I should say so!" was the response. "Their vessel seemed to be crammed with plunder from many captures; and, indeed, neither Captain Caliban—a queer name that, even for a pirate, eh?—nor his mates, Gabo and Vargo, seemed to make any secret of the destruction they were dealing right and left. Their wines were among the most delicious I had ever tasted, and I am something of a judge. Then Captain Caliban sung some English hymns for my special benefit, in about the sweetest voice I ever heard outside of a cathedral choir. The ladies at table were very polite, though somewhat sad, considering that they could speak nothing but English, at which I am rather a poor hand, as you must have discovered. And, altogether, it was a capital time I had of it, besides getting off with an unpillaged ship and a whole skin."

"There were ladies there, you say?"

"Two—perhaps a mother and daughter, I should say; and both exceedingly comely."

"How did they seem to be treated?"

"With the utmost respect and consideration. Indeed, that puzzled me. One might have taken them for the pious mother and sister of the pirate skipper—barring a family resemblance—but for the secret horror in which they seemed to regard him, his companions and his trade."

"That is strange!"

"You may well say that, señor! But do you know how the situation struck me?"

"How did it strike you, captain?"

"It looked to me as if the ladies might have been made prisoners for their beauty, and had perhaps then turned the tables on their chief captors—Caliban and Gabo, I mean—by making them ashamed of themselves."

"Making pirates ashamed of themselves!"

"Queer, to be sure! but that was none the less the impression I received."

"But in what way?"

"Oh, from the general respect and consideration that was showed them. For instance, the second mate, Vargo, who is an especially desperate-looking ruffian, once, in the course of the repast, ventured upon an indelicate remark. Caliban's face redoubled its hideousness in the frown that came over it, and Vargo received a warning look that he probably did not care to have repeated. I never saw anything like it. The ladies also seemed to have the best part of the cabin religiously and exclusively devoted to themselves. It was like a pirate ship, with a chapel aft, and the ladies as two saints."

His hearers were assuredly relieved at this piece of intelligence, strangely anomalous as it seemed.

"But," continued Val, "if your impressions were correct in this matter, would not the ladies be likely to exert their influence over the pirate captain to the saving of human life in the course of his captures?"

"Very likely," was the response, "and I have reason to believe that it is so exerted, constantly."

"What?"

"Caliban, at all events, assured me that not a single murder had been on his hands from the outset of his cruise, though he freely acknowledged that he had only been able to come in possession of his brigantine through much bloodshed. You can take that statement for what it is worth. But, in spite of the man's repulsive appearance—and that is little short of monstrous, I assure you!—he seemed to me to be speaking truthfully when he made the statement."

"But a pirate that would only rob, and not murder!"

"It does seem wild."

After some further conversation, in which Val and Ringbolt tried, but vainly, to obtain some information as to the pirate's future plan of operations, the interview terminated.

The vessels parted company shortly afterward.

Two days later on, however, a sort of verification of this strange state of affairs was received, when the Spray Sprite fell in with an American barque, which signaled a desire to communicate.

She proved to be the barque Martha, Captain Joel Peregrine, of Portland, Maine, which had been pillaged by the Black Vulture a week previously, but had then been permitted to resume her voyage, no violence having been attempted on submission having been made.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TRACKING THE PIRATE.

THE barque also proved to be packed with the crews of certain vessels, which had been destroyed by the pirate.

This had placed her on short allowances of water and provisions, which was the reason she had signaled to communicate with the privateer.

"A psalm-singing pirate may be an odd fish,"

exclaimed the Yankee skipper, in relating his unusual experience to Val and Ringbolt, "but he's none the less the sort that sails the Black Vulture, and no mistake."

"To what do you ascribe this unusual humanity on the part of Captain Caliban?" asked Val.

"To a couple of beautiful ladies, one young, the other elderly, on his passenger list," was the reply.

And then he gave further particulars, very similar to those given by the Portuguese commander.

"If the women have such half-humanizing influence over the captain," observed Val, "it is strange that they do not induce him to reform his piratical ways altogether."

"I doubt that they would be glad to, if it were possible," said Captain Peregrine, "for sweeter creatures than those same ladies I never set eyes on. But I suppose they're fortunate enough in their own estimation at being able to make him stop short of murder."

"Did you communicate personally with the ladies?"

"Only in the presence of Caliban, and he was mighty watchful that they had no chance to tell me any secrets: though apparently in everything else they were altogether unrestrained, besides having his worshipful respect."

"Is it apparently his plan to rob all vessels indiscriminately?"

"All except Portuguese, as he told me himself, with perhaps a preference in favor of British ships; which, I mean to say, he seems to be a little more glad to rob than any others, besides burning or scuttling 'em afterward. These poor devils, whom he compelled us to take on board, are all out of English ships, which he had treated in that way."

"Is Caliban a Portuguese himself?"

"The Lord only knows what he is, but he looks like a floating nightmare. However, his first mate, Gabo, is probably a Portuguese, while Vargo, the second mate, is doubtless a Spaniard."

"Are the rest of the pirates contented with this extraordinary life-sparing policy of the captain in the pursuit of his calling?"

"I should judge not. Vargo, especially, gave me the impression of a thoroughgoing ruffian who would gladly have had blood run at all opportunities, and there may be some growling occasionally among the crew. But bless you! Caliban is of the sort to rule 'em with a rod of iron. From what I saw, they hold him in no less terror than admiration. And then as long as he gives them plunder enough, why should they complain? And, for that matter, the brigantine seemed to be fairly bursting with stolen treasure of one sort or another when I was aboard her. And then, from what I heard hinted, they had already converted one ship-load into cash, either somewhere along the Barbary Coast, or among the Azore Islands, I couldn't exactly make out which."

"Did the Vulture strike you as being in excellent fighting trim?"

"Magnificent! However"—this interview was held on the poop-deck of the privateer, along whose splendidly manned and appointed deck the speaker allowed his glance to rove appreciatively—"though you are much the lighter vessel, I rather think you could lick out the pirate in anything like a square fight. However, there's no telling as to that, and sea-fights are mighty uncertain affairs."

"Well, sir," struck in Ringbolt, "we ask for nothing better than to measure our strength with that same Black Vulture, if she will only give us the chance."

Captain Peregrine laughed.

"I doubt if you'll get the chance in a hurry," said he.

"Why?" demanded Captain Val.

"You're the one ship afloat that Captain Caliban is mortally afraid of meeting."

"Did he say so?"

"Well, I inferred as much from his general conversation. And it can't be simply your dare-devil privateering reputation that occasions his fear, either; though one would think that enough in all conscience, from the ocean terror that you have made of yourselves. I argued, from certain words that I heard Gabo let fall between 'em in my presence, that they are more or less superstitious of bad luck in store for them, should they ever fall afoul of your Spray Sprite."

Val smiled sternly, while Ringbolt silently clinched his brawny hand.

If they did not choose to publish abroad the cause of their fell pursuit of the unique pirate captain of the Black Vulture, not the less was it deep-seated, indomitable and deadly.

"If you could only give us some idea as to the pirate's cruising intentions!" exclaimed Val, half in despair.

"Well," and the Yankee skipper turned his quid reflectively in his cheek, "perhaps I can."

"How?" eagerly.

"Yes; you chaps have been tarnation generous in the matter of the provisions and water. I was beginning to suffer for; and I never forget that one good turn deserves another."

"I beg that you will tell me all you know or can suggest upon this point!" cried Val.

The skipper then recounted some fragments of a conversation that he had chanced to overhear among Caliban, Gabo and Vargo.

By this it would seem that it was probably Caliban's intention to cruise in the seas adjacent to the coasts of Portugal, Spain and Morocco as late as February (it was now the middle of January, 1778), or perhaps March, doubtless with the hope of disposing of his plunder in security, after which he was ambitious to transfer his nefarious operations to the treasure-promising archipelagoes and galleon-haunted seas of the Spanish Main.

"Good!" exclaimed the young privateersman, with a long breath of relief at having come at last upon something tangible in the way of tracking his master-enemy. "Should we not overhaul our pirates between now and March, then nothing shall please me better than to track him among the West India Islands."

Ringbolt was no less cheered at this piece of information, vague and unsatisfactory as it was.

After supplying the necessities of the Martha, which was bound for the Italian port of Leghorn, the privateer set sail for Madeira; and, after a brief stay for refitting at Fayal, weighed anchor for the coast of France, in the hope of realizing prize-moneys at such ports to which the numerous captures of their cruise had been consigned, together with taking anything valuable in the British mercantile line on the way.

She was so fortunate as to make three more prizes during a rapid voyage to La Rochelle, and carry them with her into that port, after beating off a small British gunboat, the Gladiator, which had the temerity to attack her off the mouth of the Gironde.

Then a welcome surprise was in store for her at La Rochelle, where four of her previous prizes, including the Perthshire, were awaiting her arrival.

Lord Rathspey and Captain Ferris had disappeared into the interior, and were understood to be residing temporarily in Bordeaux.

The officers and crew of the Spray Sprite were received with an ovation by the authorities and inhabitants of the place.

The fame of her daring exploits had long since preceded the privateer almost everywhere throughout France, and, as war had at last been formally declared between that country and Great Britain—the gallant Lafayette and his command being already engaged in the home army operations under the immortal Washington—there was no longer any pretense of disguise for the sympathy manifested for the struggling Americans.

As a consequence marine prizes could be converted into prize-money without any sort of difficulty, once they were fairly landed inside the cordon of the British blockading fleet. This placed the privateersmen in funds with but little delay; seven other of the Sprite's prizes, which had reached the ports of Bayonne and Brest in safety, were likewise disposed of to great advantage; and during the three weeks that were occupied in a complete refitting of the gallant schooner while at La Rochelle, it was a gala time with her officers and crew on shore.

Upon one occasion, while Val and Ringbolt were strolling through the town, in all the bravery of new uniforms and a general prosperousness of feeling, the observed and admired of all observers, a young French officer of considerable consequence, a Colonel Regnault, whose hospitality they had already enjoyed, overtook them with much satisfaction in his manner.

"Messieurs, you must come with me at once!" he exclaimed. "There is another of your country's celebrities who is desirous of meeting you."

CHAPTER XXX.

A NAVAL HERO.

VAL and Ringbolt good-naturedly complied with their French friend's request by accompanying him forthwith, without asking any questions, though full of mental speculations as to the identity of the celebrated personage they were invited to meet.

"I wonder if it can be our great Doctor Franklin himself," thought Val. "To be sure, he is our country's commissioner at the Court of France just now; but then I hardly think even the Spray Sprite's fame can be so great or so deserved as to cause such a distinguished American to come all the way from Paris to La Rochelle for the express purpose of making our acquaintance."

He looked askance at Ringbolt, but that nautical individual more fully cocked his eye and drew down one corner of his mouth, as much as to say:

"Don't be uneasy, my hearty! They can't spring any big bug on us who shall prove quite big enough to take the wind out of our privateering sails."

But both were destined to an agreeable disappointment.

The celebrity desiring the pleasure of their acquaintance was not Dr. Benjamin Franklin, but

one no less noted than he, though in a very different line of usefulness, and at that time hardly more than just over the threshold of his brilliant and distinguished career.

Their companion conducted them to a club-room, overlooking the waters of the harbor, and much frequented by the military and naval officers of the port.

As soon as they were perceived to enter, a medium-sized, but athletic and alert-looking gentleman, very smartly uniformed in navy blue, with rather an excess of gold lace thereon, separated himself from a group of officers with whom he had been conversing, and stepped up to the new-comers with an eager and gratified air.

He had also a somewhat dissipated look, together with an appearance of enjoying his self-consequence to the full, but also with a bold, penetrating eye and the unmistakable air of a follower and lover of the sea.

Bowing cordially to Colonel Regnault, this gentleman seized both Val and Ringbolt impulsively by the hand, with a simultaneous clasp for each, exclaiming, in English:

"Your hands, sirs! You have already been made known to me by sight, and I trust that no formal introduction on the part of Colonel Regnault is necessary among us. My name is John Paul Jones, at your service."

Val's dark face flushed with pleasure, and Ringbolt gave a sort of ecstatic gasp.

John Paul Jones was at that time rapidly approaching the zenith of his fame, which, for dash, brilliancy and desperate hardihood, is hardly with an equal in the wide range of naval warfare and adventure; though his crowning victory, that of the Bon Homme Richard over the Serapis, was as yet in the womb of the future.

He soon placed his new friends completely at their ease by the amiability and liveliness of his conversation; they drank wine with him and Colonel Regnault in a charming balcony overlooking the blue waters of the port; and they were not long in discovering that his personal vanity was altogether a superficial covering for the sterling sailor-like abilities and the strong, heroic heart beneath.

"Oh, we shall yet win the day, my friends!" he exclaimed, when personal acknowledgments had been exchanged, and he had dwelt enthusiastically upon the achievements of the Spray Sprite as already known to fame. "France is with us in fact, the world of generous spirits in sympathy. Our Congress is wise; Washington and Gates are winning imperishable glory with our inadequate, wretchedly-equipped armies; and as for our achievements over the Britishers on the blue waters, don't they," with a proud laugh, "speak for themselves in our own persons? If I am a Scotchman by birth, it is none the less as an American that I speak with this enthusiasm. We shall win! It is only a question of time for free America to take her place among the nations of the earth, and then her mission will be to lead and outstrip them all!"

"It must come to be!" cried the young privateersman. "But oh, if our soldiers could win victories upon the land as our sailors can on the sea!"

"Blast my topknots!" interposed Ringbolt, with his breezy heartiness; "but there would be short showing for King George's battle-flag in that case. However, I doubt if we sailors could do better on sea than our compatriots on shore, were we starved, barefooted and half-frozen as they are reported to be, with the best of the veteran red-coats in their front."

"True for you, comrade!" observed Paul Jones, smiling at the other's sailor-like rudeness of speech. "But now that the French are with us, body and soul, *nous changeons tout cela*, and right speedily, let us hope."

And then his eye kindled as it rested upon the long, low black hull and raking, brigandish rig of the Spray Sprite, which rested in the docks, undergoing a thorough refitting, but a short distance from the balcony out of which they were looking.

"Ah! but you may well be proud of your gallant craft, my friends," he continued. "Her history is a romance from the hour of her heroic capture from the enemy to the present time—a short but glorious career. Let me see: she was the Britisher Virago originally, was she not, though Yankee built and rigged?"

"Yes, captain," responded Val.

And then both he and Ringbolt waxed naturally eloquent and communicative as to the privateer's exploits, in which their hearers seemed equally interested.

"A noble craft and a noble crew!" cried Jones. "A swallow for flight and an eagle for fight, I doubt not! I should dearly like to go aboard."

"I hope you will honor us with a visit, then, captain," Captain Venture hastened to say, with much earnestness. "And, Colonel Regnault, you must be with us, together with such gentlemen as Captain Jones and yourself may care to bring with you. The more the merrier, and a Yankee welcome! What do you say?"

"There isn't a man-jack of us but will feel chock-a-block with the honor!" supplemented Ringbolt. "And if we're not all drunk by the

time you're ready to go back over the rail, dash my binnacle lamp if it will be for want of good liquor in the cabin lockers!"

"Nothing could please me better," responded Jones, with another laugh at the old sea-dog's earnestness; and Colonel Regnault expressed himself as similarly agreeable to the invitation.

"Suppose we say the day after to-morrow, then," said Val. "The Sprite will be in her new fighting trim by that time, and on the day following that, we sail away for the Spanish Main."

This was cordially agreed to, and the invitation was put into further shape as to particulars.

Before the group separated, Captain Paul Jones pointed to a handsome brig-of-war that was on the ways at the side of the harbor opposite to that occupied by the privateer, and inquired of his new friends if their curiosity had been excited as to the identity of the vessel in question.

"Indeed, it has!" responded Val; "and that notwithstanding the American ensign at her gall; for there has been such evident secrecy in the brig's preparations as most naturally to pique the very inquisitiveness it has seemed the intention to baffle."

Captain Jones smiled with no little complacency, as did Colonel Regnault likewise.

"There has been reason enough for the secrecy attempted," he explained, "when one considers the number of British spies that may be lurking everywhere along the coast, for the information of their blockading fleet out yonder beyond the harbor bar, and elsewhere."

"The brig is my new command, the Ranger, eighteen guns, in which I intend to give their three-decker watch-dogs the slip, to say nothing of my fighting intentions afterward, by the opening of April."

"The blockaders may give you trouble," observed Val, eying the brig critically. "We were delayed not a little by beating off one of their gunboats, further south, and only managed to slip in here by the sheerest good-luck. However, it is easier to run a blockade out than in, and, with such a capital sailer as the Ranger looks to be, you will doubtless be successful."

"I am that or nothing always," replied the star naval hero of his time, but without a particle of braggadocio in his tone or manner. "You see, it is of necessity a triumph or annihilation with me," and he good-humoredly made a gesture about his throat, as indicative of the hangman's noose which none knew better than he would be his speedy fortune if once taken alive by the enemy. "However, once fairly at sea, I shall be most eagerly on the lookout for the cruiser which, it is generally understood, the Britishers are specially fitting out with a view to my interception and capture."

"Ha! you have knowledge, then, of such a vessel being especially fitted and commissioned?"

"Yes; the Drake, their crack sloop-of-war, twenty guns, brand-new, and in every way my superior in men and armament. However," with his quiet and somewhat sinister smile, "he boasts best who boasts last.* If you were going to remain longer in port, my friends, nothing would please me better than to show you over my little brig. But it may be our fortune to meet elsewhere."

CHAPTER XXXI.

HIGH JINKS ON THE PRIVATEER.

THE dinner party in honor of Captain Paul Jones and other distinguished guests was a memorable occasion on board the bold privateer.

The cheer was excellent, the guests in the gayests of moods, their hosts anxious to please; there was as much feasting and drinking, though of a somewhat coarser quality, in the fore-castle and mess-rooms as in the cabin itself; and before the afternoon was half spent there were plentiful indications of old Ringbolt's prediction being made good, to the effect that if all hands were not over-merry it was not for the want of the festive wherewithal to become so.

At last Ringbolt and Dunbar came out of the cabin, attended by the steward, with orders to hoist out of the hold and broach a whole butt of prime Canary wine for the delectation of the entire crew, with the best wishes of their young commander, and as a godspeed for the long and adventurous voyage in the prospective.

The announcement was received with the uproarious enthusiasm in keeping with such wholesale conviviality, the wine was duly broached and distributed around the capstan-head, and toasts were proposed and drank with a rapidity of sequence that defied the proper adjustment of bumper to pledge.

Thus while "Confusion to King George" was being hobnobbed with appropriate growls, anathemas and head-shakings among certain of the revelers, these would be oddly enough intermingled with cheers and huzzas on the part of others who imagined they were still pledging "Success to the American Arms!" "The Girls we

* The anticipated battle between the Drake and the Ranger, in the ensuing month of April, is a piece of history. It resulted in one of the most brilliant and signal victories in the career of Paul Jones.

Left Behind us!" or some equally inspiring theme, perhaps yet others, still more backward or muddled in keeping score, would be still grave, if not positively saddened and tearful, while solemnly drinking to "The Memory of our Fallen Braves!"

It was a good deal like the confusion said to have existed among certain muddled supernumeraries in the production of a classic drama, where, in response to the oratorical demand in the market-place, "Would ye be slaves forevermore?" the embarrassing answer was vociferated, "We would, we would!" While to the next and counter-question of "Would ye be citizens and freemen?" the response of "Never! never!" was thundered back with no less fervor and unanimity.

Then Ringbolt roared out a sea-song, to be followed by Mr. Dunbar's champion imitation of a Londoner trying to insist upon a draught of "old Holland gin, half-and-half, and hot and heavy," without the omission or misplacement of the letter H; Mr. Maltby, the boatswain, whistled the latest popular air with his professional whistle as the musical instrument, and Mr. McIntosh, the gun-master, executed a Highland broadsword dance over two cutlasses crossed on the deck with a capering vigor and activity that were just wonderful to behold.

Captain Vanguard and his guests came out to take a view of the fun when it was at its climax.

"Oh, it's just high jinks on the Spray Sprite, your Honors—a regular fore and aft frolic!" cried Ringbolt, waving his glass over his head. "Come, my lads! now's your time. A Yankee cheer, and three times three, for Captain Paul Jones, the Son of the Sea, and America's generous French well-wishers, that are our brave skipper's guests on this bright March day!"

That the cheers were given with a gusto may be depended upon.

Before this stage had been reached, Captain Val had found opportunity to acquaint Captain Jones with the interior significance of his pursuit of the Black Vulture, and now, as the guests temporarily broke up into groups over the privateer's quarter-deck for the discussion of their post-prandial cigars, pending the making of their acknowledgments and adieux, for the first time that distinguished commander took occasion to convey his impressions in the matter.

"Of course," said he, "some intelligence of this strange pirate's depredations had already reached me. But you are the first to inform me of the bloodlessness of his captures. A pirate, and yet a life-sparer, at the intercession of two good women, and those women his captives. An extraordinary anomaly, to be sure!"

"You may well say that," replied Val, moodily. "It is unheard-of heretofore, I should say."

"Not quite. You are wrong there. Such another is recorded in Morgan, the Buccaneer's time. However, it is sufficiently strange, in all conscience. You know this Captain Caliban personally, you say?"

"I have known him and of him since my early boyhood. You have his remarkable origin, character and repulsiveness of appearance, as I have sketched them. The man is a species of physical, moral and intellectual monster."

"Might he be likewise a fanatic?"

"In his hatred of mankind, yes, likely enough."

"And yet that he is susceptible to refining and humanizing influences is also apparent."

"It would seem so," reluctantly.

"Then he has an exquisite voice, is a singer of hymns, and was a professed convert to religion."

"Professed or pretended, whichever you choose."

"Still might he not have developed into a religious fanatic likewise?"

"Yes, possibly—after his wild and brutish fashion."

"There you have him, then. The man is doubly a fanatic, and in a contradictory sense that he can have no notion of in his own consciousness."

"I hardly understand you, sir."

"Thus, then: Exasperation at his repulsiveness of aspect (which necessarily makes him an outcast from the gentler associations which his talents might otherwise adorn) has stimulated his morbid and misanthropical hatred of the world. This has made him a pirate—necessarily, he doubtless argues with himself, in sheer self-defense, no less than in revenge against the fate or the circumstances, of which he is the victim, rather than the sport. Religion, which he perhaps first turned to hypocritically, becomes a sincerer belief—perchance his secret terror—through the influence exerted upon him by these devout beings who have become his captives. This is his counter-fanaticism, as you might say. He will so far yield to its demand as to abstain from further bloodshed, but no more than that. Then his fanaticism of hatred still retains its sway so far as robbery is concerned. See?"

"Well, partly, sir," still doubtfully.

Captain Jones laughed.

"That is more than I do myself, then," he

cried, gayly. "Somehow I feel as if I had tried to be metaphysical and profound, only to get sadly muddled for my pains. However, I have been published as a pirate myself—by the British, you know," with another laugh; "which may account for an odd sort of sympathy that I naturally feel for—or let me say a curious interest in—this queerly piratical Captain Caliban."

"At all events, think over what I have suggested, Captain Venture, and perhaps you will find yourself disposed to judge him less harshly."

"Good-by, sir; and it is my earnest hope that we may meet again. I shall now tender my adieux to your subordinate officers; and, if you say so, I would like to break a bottle of wine over your gallant craft's figure-head in wishing her a fair voyage and the best of continued good luck!"

This was accordingly done amid the acclamations of the Sea Sprite's ship's company, and the memorable visit was at an end.

"There he goes!" said Tom Ringbolt, waving his hand over the taffrail at the boat that was carrying the guests back to the shore, and in the stern-sheets of which the trim-built American naval hero showed easily as the most conspicuous figure; "as gallant a sailor fighting-man as ever paced quarter-deck or wore a cocked hat over his left eyebrow! though if our Captain Val Venture don't equal him afore this war is over, it will be the fault of the historian and not of the actual events."

"Leave me out of the count!" exclaimed Val, half angrily. "It's too preposterous, Tom, even with allowances for the wine you've been drinking."

But Mr. Ringbolt's words had been overheard by Mr. Dunbar, who thereupon tipped them to the fore-castle, with the result of evoking as loud and hearty a cheer as their indorsement as had been given to Paul Jones himself when stepping over the privateer's rail.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HO FOR THE SPANISH MAIN.

THE privateer had an extremely fair and rapid run, but without sighting a single prize after quitting the coast of France until she was in the neighborhood of the Bermudas.

Here, however, the adventurous stage was begun in earnest, and there was little lack of excitement from that time forward.

A rich British West Indianman was her first prize, and then, two days later, when well on the passage across the Gulf Stream to the Bahama Banks, two sail were sighted on her weather bow, which proved to be the British armed brig Spitfire, with a large and heavily-laden transport, the Albatross, in convoy.

Overtaking them with her accustomed celerity, the Spray Sprite went to work in her prompt and business-like way.

Dashing between the pair, a cannon-ball from her bow-gun athwart the bows of the transport caused her to heave to, without any additional warning.

The brig was but indifferently armed with the oldest-fashioned swivels of light caliber and poorly-manned, but she made a plucky fight of half an hour before succumbing to the privateer's superiority.

In taking possession of the two prizes, Captain Val complimented the commander of the Spitfire for the gallantry of his defense, and received a welcome piece of intelligence in return.

Only the week previous the brig and her convoy were just on the point of being captured by the piratical brigantine when the timely appearance of a British frigate caused the corsair to consider prudence the better part of valor, and she had sailed away into the southwest.

It was thus made sufficiently evident that the Black Vulture was considerably ahead of the privateer in getting in her devastating work in the Spanish Main.

Dispatching both prizes, together with their officers and crews as prisoners of war, for New Orleans, then in the hands of the French, Captain Val sailed away for the southwest, now as heretofore with the Vulture and her capture as his main object in life.

The following night, after passing the Bahamas, a large vessel on fire was sighted.

Nothing could be made out of her name or character when the privateer came within hail, though it was fair to suppose her as one of the pirate's victims.

She was stood by until burned to the water's edge in the hope of finding some signs of her survivors, but without success.

At daybreak of the following day, however, a solitary castaway was picked up out of a small open boat, which proved to have belonged to the unfortunate vessel.

The man had been her steward, and, doubting not at the time of the pirate's attack that all hands were to be murdered, he had managed to conceal himself in the small boat and cut adrift without attracting attention, though without provisions or water.

The man was a mulatto named Thompson. He was in a deplorable condition of suffering when relieved, and would doubtless soon have perished.

He reported the doomed craft to have been the Sardinian barque Santa Gloria, and seemed not a little astonished at finding himself incorporated with the ship's company of a Yankee privateer, and on being informed that the lives of his whilom shipmates had, in all probability, been spared by their pirate captor.

Two days later the privateer fell in with an unlooked-for and what subsequently proved a most important discovery.

Early in the day one of those peculiarly parched, isolated little sandy islands, or keys, that are an occasional feature of those tropical seas, was sighted.

Later on, the lookout reported a black speck visible on the sands, which might be a small boat or the body of a man.

Instantly every glass on the quarter-deck was leveled, and all sail was made for the island, which would otherwise have received no attention.

The sun was now about two hours high, and the air was like a furnace, with but little wind. "It is a man!" exclaimed Val, after a prolonged examination. "I fancy I can even see some movement, as if he were trying to signal us."

Ringbolt, who, together with Mr. Dunbar, was engaged in a like examination, presently dropped his telescope, with a confirmatory nod.

"Marooned!" he ejaculated.

"I think you are right," observed Mr. Dunbar. "We've had no storms, which would account for a simple castaway being alive on that desolate sand-bank. The man must have been marooned there, and quite recently, or he would be dead of thirst by this time. Captain Venture, I shouldn't wonder if some fresh news of our pirate were awaiting us."

Val's heart had already made a hopeful leap at the thought of the man proving to have been marooned by the Black Vulture.

Still he only nodded.

"We must not be over-sanguine," he replied. "The Vulture is, doubtless, not the only pirate in these seas."

"But she's the only one we know anything about," interposed Ringbolt, whose face had already lighted up with expectancy, "that would be likely to maroon a mutineer, for instance, instead of tossing him to the sharks."

Their anticipations were not destined to disappointment.

The island was rapidly neared, and then all doubts were at an end.

It was a singularly desolate spot, a mere reefy speck amid the waste of waters, without a sign of vegetation, and barely raising its sandy backbone above the wash of the waves.

The solitary occupant was lying on his side, and apparently just able to feebly wave an arm occasionally as a signal that he was still alive.

Val was so impatient that he sprang into the boat that was putting off from the Spray Sprite, though Ringbolt had taken charge.

A bag of provisions and some water had been tossed in, and the boat was soon at the edge of the reef.

It was a clear case of the barbarous practice known as marooning, much more common in those days than now, and by no means strictly confined to piratical custom either, where for some offense a sailor was put ashore on some desolate isle, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, to be there overtaken by a lingering and horrible death, since the chances of his being perceived and taken off by a passing vessel were almost as nothing.

The sufferer in this instance was a very powerful man in the somewhat extravagant garb of an adventurer of those wild seas.

His face was a most villainous one, though lighted up now with a new hope, as he brought himself to a sitting posture, and gazed gratefully at his deliverers.

At his side were a provision-sack, a tiny water-keg—both apparently empty—and a musket, such having been the mocking last gifts of his marooners before leaving him to his miserable fate.

Val was the first to spring ashore to the man's relief.

The man looked at him in a half dazed way, greedily drank of the water that was placed to his lips, and then, with a hoarse, parched cry, scrambled to his feet.

"Vengeance!" he managed to exclaim, in Spanish! "Body of God! but I'll yet be avenged on Caliban!"

He then fell down in a species of faint, but was speedily revived with a liberal dose of brandy, after which he was forthwith carried on board the schooner.

A few hours later, when the privateer was sheeting away for the southwest under a refreshing puff of the trade winds, Dr. Mackenzie reported the rescued man to be considerably refreshed and invigorated.

"What do you make of him?" asked Val, preparing to go to the fellow in Ringbolt's company.

"I mak' him out to be," replied the surgeon, in his broad Scotch brogue, "about the most unconscionable an' desperate rascal that is so far unchanged."

"Have you extracted any information from him as yet?"
 "Na, na! he's wary, mon, he's wary."
 "Is he inquisitive?"
 "A' should say so, an' mair."
 "Anxious to know who and what we are, eh, before giving any of his own history?"
 "Just so, captain, just so."
 "You have not satisfied his curiosity as yet?"
 "Not I."

"Come, then; we will go to him at once. If Caliban marooned him, however, it is more than likely that the sooner we declare our character and intentions the better for such use as we can make of him."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAROONER'S VICTIM.

THE rescued man was for some time disposed to be very sullen and uncommunicative.

"Look here, my man!" said Captain Val, at last; "how would you relish being marooned again?"

The fellow looked up from his hammock with a wild and startled gaze.

He seemed to be a Spaniard, but was fairly conversant with English, the language in which the conference was taking place.

"You wouldn't do it!" he exclaimed, huskily. "Santa Maria! you wouldn't have the heart to do it, captain?"

Val smiled coldly, while Ringbolt and the surgeon managed to chuckle demoniacally, as if marooning unfortunate seamen upon tropical sand-banks was the very dearest delight of their natures, second only, perhaps, to that of tossing them to the sharks.

"Wouldn't I, though?" replied the young commander. "Well, I'd advise you not to push my patience too far, friend."

"Diablo! what would you know of me, then, commander?"

"Everything."

"Caramba! but you will tell me next to nothing about your ship or yourself?"

"I shall do as I please in that line."

"Humph! so shall I in my line, then."

"No, you are mistaken. You will grow communicative forthwith, and truthful, too—look to that!"

"But if I refuse?"

"Well, then, do you prefer hanging to marooning?"

The rascal was uncomfortable again, though he managed to shrug his shoulders with an attempt at indifference.

"Por Dios! it may be quicker and less painful, for that matter, though a trifle sudden for my taste, I don't mind confessing to you."

"Come, no further trifling! You are a pirate, that much I am certain of; and that you were marooned out of the Black Vulture by Captain Caliban, you have yourself admitted."

"What!" with a horrible oath; "did I admit that?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I was perhaps more or less delirious. No wonder, too; for my brain still feels more than half cooked in my skull. It was my third day on that accursed reef. One more would have finished me."

"You ought to be more grateful to us for snatching you out of such a cruel predicament."

"Look here, Señor Capitan!" after a reflective pause; "I am all that—if you will only help me to my revenge."

Captain Val also reflected a moment before making his response.

"If you mean," he said, slowly, at last, "to make use of your services in running down Caliban and his accursed crew, you can depend upon my assisting your revenge to that extent. Such is one of the chief missions of the Spray Sprite and her ship's company."

The pirate suddenly sat bolt-upright in his hammock, throwing his legs out over its side.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, with an eager look; "is this the privateer, then?"

"Yes."

"Diablo! why didn't some one of you say so before?"

"There was no hurry."

"But the mere mention of that would have loosened my tongue in my head like a clapper in a wedding-bell."

"You are now ready to be communicative, then?"

"With all my heart."

"Attend, then. What is your name?"

"Pablo Jesus Santa Maria Dominico Vargo," with an air of pride.

"Vargo?"

"Yes. You see," with a chuckle, "my good parents at Barcelona, which had the honor of being my birthplace, intended me for holy orders, instead of a warlike career, as you might say. Ha, ha, ha! Hence the holiness of my numerous and highly Christian names, which you are at liberty to omit," with an off-hand gesture, "as among friends. I say, *comandante*."

"Well?"

"I am still a bit shaky, and another nip of that prime brandy of yours might brace me up quite a little."

Dr. Mackenzie supplied a good draught of the desired stimulant, which Pablo Jesus Santa Maria Dominico Vargo tossed off like so much water, and with an eloquent smacking of his thick bearded lips.

"So you are Vargo?" continued Val.

A complacent nod of assent.

"Caliban's second mate that was?"

"Correcto, Señor Capitan, and at your service."

"And the bloodiest-minded of his subordinates, to whom the bloodless system of pirating was most distasteful?"

Vargo elevated his bushy brows in mock deprecation, and then smiled horribly.

"Look here, capitan," with a laugh, "aren't you disposed to be somewhat personal in your characterizations?"

"Yes, at times. Why were you marooned?"

"Hold on! I like to be truthful in speaking of myself; but, before I go on, give me your word that, whatever I may say, I am henceforth a free man and under your protection while on board the Spray Sprite."

"You have my pledge to that effect. Go on."

"But do you go on. I rather prefer the interrogatory style."

"Why were you marooned?"

"For conspiring against Captain Caliban. Maledictions! but for one man's taint-heartedness I'd have been master of the brigantine, and of the ladies into the bargain."

Val started and Ringbolt's face assumed a dangerous look. But it was not necessary for this ruffian to know everything, and they continued to dissemble.

"You would have mutinied, eh?"

"Por Dios! but I would that, and with a vengeance, too."

"Why were you discontented?"

"Carajo! it is an old story. Piracy without bloodshed! think of it. I had long been sick of the whole business. And with psalm-singing and a pair of goody-goody virtuous saints thrown in! Good God! male prisoners are just fit for sharks, and nothing else. The old maxim, 'Dead men tell no tales,' was always good enough for me. I am a conservative man—one of your orthodox ducks, as you might say. And as for lady captives, especially when they are fair to look upon—"

Val interrupted him with a furious and loathing gesture, while Ringbolt gritted his teeth.

"Never mind your private sentiments!" cried the former. "We shall spare you their ventilation."

"As you please."

And then seizing the brandy flask, which the surgeon had unguardedly placed within his reach, and taking an enormous pull at its fiery contents before being prevented, this representative corsair of the eighteenth century burst out into a wild and infamous lyric, in the *patois* of the Caribbean, of such import as would have shocked the sensibilities of an Algerine *seraglio*.

Ringbolt suddenly seized hold of him and administered a shaking-up of the ruffian that seemed to rattle every bone in his body.

"Avast there, you son of a cave-witch by a sea-salamander!" he exclaimed, through his clinched teeth. "Attend to business now, you lubber! and no more of your devil's piping, or I'll make shark-meat of your infernal carcass in the flutter of a rope's yarn!"

The pirate accepted the correction, rough as it was, with much good humor, and laughed as he sat up again.

"Fins off!" he said. "Well, go on with your blasted catechism, captain. I'm your man."

"Explain the cause of your mutiny," continued Val.

"Oh, by Jove!" with a volume of profanity; "but it really wouldn't interest you, capitan. Let be, let be! Caliban said I was disrespectful to the ladies, and when I accused him of being the lily-liver that he is, with no more appetite for slaughter and shark-feeding than a chicken-hawk for barley-grains, he fired me clean across the brig's waist, with my head in the lee scuppers. Curse him! but for his tigrish strength and temper—and Satan himself couldn't compare with him for one or the other—my knife would have been in his ribs then and there. But the trouble had been brewing before that. I plotted, he found me out, and marooned me. That is the long and short of it."

"I wonder he didn't throw you to the sharks forthwith!" growled Ringbolt, disgustedly.

"Caramba! he was willing enough, and so was John Gabo, for that matter."

"Who interposed for you?" demanded Val.

"The ladies, God bless them! They're beauties, both of 'em. Fair, sleek, blue-eyed, mermaid-voiced, ripe-lipped—just the sort to set a dark man's blood on fire, and, moreover—"

"Shut up your mouth till you're ordered to open it! Look here. You shall have the freedom of the ship here, under proper precautions, on the sole condition that you guide us to the Vulture's whereabouts. How does that suit you?"

"Bueno!"

"But can you comply with the condition demanded?"

"Yes; sooner or later. But hold on! I'm to share in whatever treasure may be found in her?"

"Yes," reflectively. "You shall have a *pro rata* share in that case, as if you were my third mate."

"Bueno! I accept."

"Where are we most likely to come in the pirate's proximity?"

"Let me see; what are your bearings now?"

"Fifty leagues off Porto Rico to the north-east."

"Good! you're not greatly out of the Vulture's track. Do you know where the Pelican Islands are?"

"Yes; though they're not down on our chart."

"That's your cue. Steer for the Pelicans. I'll tell you more later on. But, *caramba*, don't I deserve another drop of that brandy now?"

And so the memorable interview terminated.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AMONG THE ISLANDS.

THE Pelicans, as they were then named, were a group of coral islets, long famous, or rather infamous, as a pirate rendezvous, lying between the eleventh and twelfth parallel of north latitude, or about midway in the horseshoe half-circle formed by the Caribbees on the east, Porto Rico and San Domingo on the north, and the Lesser Antilles on the south.

Lovelier island Edens were nowhere embosomed in the blue wastes of the warm southern seas.

They were a fitting realization of the poetical description, "Tropic isles of Eden lying in dark-purpling spheres of sea." Varying in size, irregular in formation, many in number, they were from time to time the nest and temporary abiding-place of the lawless and ruthless rovers of the sea from the earliest buccaneering days.

The first of these islands, or the most northward of their emerald, gem-like ocean chain, was sighted by the lookout of the Spray Sprite on the morning of the third day following the directions furnished by the marooned pirate, Vargo.

Val and Ringbolt were in earnest consultation in the cabin when word came that the islands were visible upon the horizon.

"You are sure," asked the former, with no little anxiety, "that you have kept Vargo under constant and complete espionage since he has been with us?"

"I can answer as to that," was the confident reply. "No trouble about finding men to spy upon him either, since the rascal is so generally detested. I don't believe he has won the confidence of a man or boy on board."

"Nothing suspicious has been observed in him, then?"

"Nothing. I credit him with honesty in his frenzy of hatred against Caliban, which is all we need as a guarantee of his good faith with us. To be sure, there are some idle theories afloat among the crew as to the possibility of his tricking us. But they are not worth mentioning."

"But what are the theories?"

"Oh! to the effect that the man's having been marooned was all a trick between him and Caliban, for the express purpose of leading us into a trap; and all that sort of rot."

"Wait! let me think. That is just possible, but nothing more. No; I agree with you. It is not worth a thought."

"I should say not. Why, the man was half-gone when we picked him off the reef! Besides, his story of his quarrel with Caliban coincides with what we had heard at second-hand before."

"That is true."

"Oh, we can trust the rascal as we have been trusting him—that is, with a pistol at his head, so to speak."

"We'll take the risk, at all events. Have you ever been among the Pelicans before?"

"Never; though I once sighted them on a voyage to Trinidad, five years or more ago."

"Do you think that Vargo is prepared with more definite information for us, now that we are in sight of the group?"

"I can't say, Cap. But why not summon him down here at once, and have him speak for himself?"

"A good idea!"

It was acted upon forthwith, and Vargo presently made his appearance.

He was a magnificently-built man, and was now appearing to better advantage than when newly rescued from the sun-baked and sea-beat ocean reef.

However, he still carried himself with an easy semi-insolence of general bearing, though respectful in the main to the officers of the privateer, and the undisguised aversion in which he was held by the bulk of the ship's company did not seem to trouble him in the least.

"The Pelicans are reported in sight, Vargo," said Captain Val, abruptly.

"I know it," was the laconic response.

"Have you any further suggestions to make at this juncture?"

"Si, señor," quietly, "and at your good service. I was rather expecting to be sent for."

He coolly seated himself at the saloon table, drew some writing materials toward him, and, after putting to one side the fragrant cigar he was smoking, began to map out a chart of the Pelican Archipelago with much rapidity and no little skill.

His companions looked in considerable surprise.

Heat last signed them to inspect his work, and as they bent their heads over it, he explained, marking out the localities with his pen.

"You will observe," he proceeded, "that I have here indicated a dozen or more islets, of various sizes, forming a sort of necklace or chain, with three companion isles bunched together in the middle of the ring, and two or three outliers to the north and east."

"There are many more islets in the group than those I have indicated, but they are insignificant—merely green volcanic mountain-tops thrust up out of the water, and ringed by the inevitable reefs of coral."

"These that I have set down are the only ones worth considering."

"The island which our lookout has just reported is this northernmost outlier just here. It is named El Grifo, and, though very beautiful and of considerable extent, is of no consequence as a pirate's retreat. Its reef-inlets are easily accessible for an attacking force, and there are no intricate masked lagoons in the interior so dear to your true sea rover's heart."

"The other outliers are barren rocks, not worth considering."

"The islands forming the ring, or necklace, are of not much more account than those indicated, save as they do form the ring or chain, for the protection or masking of the three star islands in the inclosed sea—the queen gems of the ocean brooch, as you might say."

"These circling islets are the links in a superb island zone, as it were, with but few safe passages between the links; and the little sea or great bay which they thus inclose has an average diameter of about fifty miles."

"The three star isles in the middle of the ring are named respectively El Frito, El Carpo, El Sado. They are little heavens of the sea, formerly the home of a fierce tribe of the Caribs, long since exterminated by the buccaneers, though a few wretched survivors may still linger among the wild glens and delicious valleys."

"Observe that these three companion isles are very close together, and separated by winding creeks or lagoons, very narrow."

"Their approach is barred by no immediate reef, though the intersecting lagoons offer such a retreat as is nowhere else to be found in the world of waters."

"Once intrenched therein, a craft of corsairs might safely defy the search of the navies of the world."

"Line-of-battle ships, and even frigates and sloops of war, would find difficulty, in the first place, in piercing the main island cordon, even with such an experienced pilot as myself to show the way; and, once within the interior sea, might still be defied with security by the bold men who would occupy the nest amid the central or companion isles."

"Seniors, such are the Pelicans, and here," he placed his indicator in the center of the star trio, as they may be called, "is the spot, the haven of refuge, into which John Gabo will steer the Black Vulture, if he may not have already succeeded in doing so."

Vargo paused, and looked up gravely, to observe the effect of his description upon his companions.

To say that they regarded him with increased respect, if not admiration, is not to exaggerate.

Superior enlightenment upon almost any subject, together with adequate descriptive power, must ever command consideration, even in those whom we may otherwise despise.

"You seem to be well informed, Vargo," said Val, politely, while Ringbolt nodded his approval.

"I ought to be," was the calm response. "I served, with John Gabo, under one of Blackbeard's immediate lieutenants and successors, and I've been a pirate off and on among the Pelicans for the past forty years."

Both men looked at him in amazement, for, superficially, his general aspect was that of a man less than that many years of age.

"Forty years!" echoed Ringbolt. "Why, man alive! unless you're the Wandering Jew, or the Old Man of the Sea himself, how old do you call yourself?"

Vargo smiled strangely.

Then he pushed back the thick, bushy and coal-black hair from his temples and forehead, baring his lineaments to their critical inspection as never before.

"Judge for yourselves," he said.

They did so, and to their continued surprise.

The dark, mysterious and forbidding face, thus revealed to them as never before, was here and there seamed over with lines and crows'-feet which, in spite of the raven blackness of his

hair and the fierce brightness of the sullen, inscrutable eyes, could scarcely have been produced by less than three score years; to say nothing of the dark history of crime and violence and desperate adventure that seemed to be suggested over and over again, as a species of terrible writing between the lines.

"Vargo," said Captain Val, after a long pause, while Ringbolt gave a sort of wondering snort or grunt, "you are evidently a—most remarkable person."

"Caramba! I've been called that by more men than yourself, comandaro. What would you? The world is a fierce lottery, and if most of its prizes that I have heretofore drawn were dipped in blood, what are the odds when all's over and done?"

And he returned indifferently to the inspection of his chart.

"Look!" and he pointed to a passage between two of the island-links on the right of the inclosing sea-circle. "Here is the narrowest and most tortuous, but also the deepest, of the few gateways into the charmed sea."

"What of that?" asked Captain Val, after a pause.

"I know John Gabo well, señor; and Caliban will wisely intrust the pilotage of the Black Vulture to his experience."

"Well?"

"This is El Paso del Diablo—the Devil's Pass."

"Yes?"

"And John Gabo, of all others, will select this gateway through the island-circle."

"Ah!"

"Yes, señor."

"How far are we from this passage?"

"El Grifo is just one hundred miles therefrom, señor; and we ought to be taking in fresh water at El Grifo by noon of to-day, if this wind holds upon our starboard quarter."

"Good! And what would you then propose, or suggest, Vargo?"

"That we sail thence for El Paso del Diablo with the least possible delay."

"And then?"

"That depends. If the Vulture shall have already disappeared into the Pass, we shall follow. If she may not have yet arrived, we shall lie in wait for her in a nook that is known to me."

"But how shall we be able to tell whether she may have preceded us into the Pass or not?"

"You would not be able to do so; but I shall. Leave it to me. That is, if you are to trust me."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VOICE FROM AFAR.

If they were to trust in him, Vargo, confessedly the terrible, the remorseless, the mysterious?

Val and Ringbolt looked at him, and then at each other.

"I shall trust in you, Vargo," said Captain Val Venture, slowly, and after a long pause. "Yes; but just in so far as I can watch you, and no further."

The man nodded carelessly.

"That will do," he said. "Putting myself in your place, I would be equally prudent, equally distrustful. However," quietly, "you will find me incapable of betraying you. Now to business again."

"Let us go on deck first," suggested the young commander.

They did so, to find that El Grifo, the outlier of the Pelican group, was now plainly visible with the glass from the poop.

As the schooner was doing well, with a fair westerly wind on her starboard quarter, and every stitch drawing beautifully, twenty minutes later the island was plainly visible with the naked eye.

"You'll find a wide jag through the reef on the southerly side," said Vargo. "It is a good boat-entrance, and in a little ravine near to the landing there is a spring of as delicious water as was ever mixed with brandy."

"It is fifty miles, you say," observed Captain Val, "from yonder island to the deep pass through the island circle?"

"Si, señor."

"And how far from El Grifo to the nearest of the main belt?"

"Less than twenty miles. The zone is distinctly visible from where you will land for water on El Grifo."

"I say, Vargo!"

"Bueno, señor?"

"How shall you be able to tell whether the Vulture will have preceded us through the Devil's Pass or not when we get there?"

"Easily enough, capitan."

"You don't object to telling me?"

"Oh, by no means! Midway through the pass, there is a smooth, lofty rock, topped by an Indian idol, which no pirate ever passes without broaching a cask of wine at, and leaving the empty cask at the water's edge, as a sort of offering to the earthenware image. Why this is done I know not. It is a superstitious custom older than my time, but one that is never disregarded. Such an old hand as John Gabo would

be the last in the world to neglect the ceremony. Bueno! If there shall be found a cask recently broached at the foot of *La Roca del Pirato*, the Vulture will have preceded us through El Paso del *Diablo*; otherwise not."

"But other pirates may be making use of the Pelican cordon as a retreat just now."

"True, señor. We must take our chances as to that. However, I think I would not be likely to be deceived."

"What do you think are our chances?"

"As to overtaking the Vulture, do you mean, señor?"

"Certainly. As to whipping her, we'll attend to that, if the fight can only be forced upon the corsair."

Vargo smiled gravely.

Perhaps he was less confident than the young privateersman on this point.

"She was less than six days ahead of you when you took me on board, four days ago," he replied, "and you are the better sailer, without having been interrupted, while the Vulture may have taken a prize or two in the interim."

"Well?"

"I have a notion that she is just about at the Devil's Pass now, if she may not have already gone through it."

"But might there not be some man-of-war to intercept her there?"

"Caramba, yes, señor! And the heavens might fall, for that matter."

"I noticed your smile but now, Vargo. Do you have any doubts as to our ability to whip out the Vulture in an open fight?"

"There wouldn't be much of an 'open' inside the Pass, for instance."

"Well, in any event, then?"

"You are pretty evenly matched," said Vargo, guardedly, but with an air of earnestness. "But you will win. Of course, it is my interest that you should do so; though, in any case, I couldn't afford to be taken alive by Caliban."

"That man is a good 'un!" commented Ringbolt, in an undertone, as the ex-pirate sauntered off forward. "Desperate sea-bravo, as he may have been, I do not think treachery is in him."

They found the lay of El Grifo just as Vargo had stated, and, boats being sent ashore by the reef-entrance described by him, the work of replenishing the water supply was speedily under way.

It was nearly completed when a strange rumbling boom, repeated over and over again, came rolling over the sea from the southwest.

The superstitions of some of the privateer's crew were instantly excited.

"Temblo! temblo!" (An earthquake! the earth trembles!) exclaimed a Spanish-American adventurer among them.

"Terramote!" (the earth moves!)—a yet stronger expression, cried another—a sailor from the Isthmus, who might also be supposed to take the alarm from experience.

Their less superstitious companions, however, only looked grave or curious, and there was little likelihood of the panic becoming general.

The distant boomings continued, with something unearthly in their suggestiveness, for the sky was of sapphire purity and clearness, with no possibility of a thunder-storm within a hundred miles from the spot.

"A voice from the sea, at all events!" observed Captain Val. "What can it mean?"

"Wait!" interposed Vargo, who was standing near, by the starboard bulwarks.

He vaulted over the rail, down into one of the boats, which had just returned with a cargo of filled casks, and, bending over the gunwale, placed his ear to the surface of the sea, which at this sheltered spot was as smooth as a looking-glass.

"Caramba! a cannonade!" he exclaimed, looking up. Then, with a fierce light, like a revelation, breaking over his swarthy, secret face: "It is from the Devil's Pass, fifty miles away!" he cried. "Ten to one it's the Vulture in a sea-fight for the possession of the Pass!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED PRIZE.

INSTANTLY there was much animation on board the privateer at this announcement of Vargo's, the correctness of which was not to be doubted now that the explanation of the far-away boomings was formulated.

Indeed, every one was wondering that it had not suggested itself from the first.

The work of getting the water-casks aboard was expedited, and in a surprisingly short space of time the schooner was sheeting away for the southwest, like a gigantic storm-bird scenting the battle from afar.

However, the wind had failed to little or nothing.

It was in the middle of the afternoon when a sail—only one, but that of a vessel apparently coming down on what wind there was—was sighted to the southwest.

The cordon of the Pelican island chain was by this time ten miles away on the Sprite's lee, and, as the wind fortunately began to freshen, there was a probability of the vessels coming within hail inside of an hour.

"A large vessel, with one of her topmasts

knocked away!" commented Val, after a long study of the stranger.

"Ay, ay, sir!" echoed Ringbolt, similarly employed, "and with most of her top-works in rags and tatters, I should say!"

Mr. Dunbar, the second mate, was of a similar opinion.

Captain Val passed his telescope to Vargo, who was contemplating the stranger from under frowning brows, and with folded arms.

"*Caramba!* I hardly think I need the glass, sir," he replied, politely accepting it just the same; "since my eyes have generally stood by me as distance-piercers on their own account. However, *miles gracias!*"—a thousand thanks.

"Is it the brigantine?" demanded Val, after the ex-corsair had leveled and lowered the glass.

"No, sir; not such good luck—though, perhaps, a fairish streak of it for you, in an off-hand way."

"What do you make her out to be?"

"A sloop-of-war."

"Ha! British?"

"Every inch."

"You're sure?"

"Dead sure. The Vulture has doubtless held her at bay long enough to escape into the Devil's Pass, where it would be madness for a war-ship drawing that one's water to follow at hazard."

"What else do you infer?"

"That the sloop has been badly handled, and is consequently in a bad temper; moreover, nevertheless, that she takes us for one of her countrymen, and is probably in hopes of obtaining a pilot from us, in order that she may follow in through the pass. Sir, you are still in luck. If you've a mind to keep up the deception, you may make a prize of her discontented ladyship."

Everything, to the smallest particular, as thus forecast by Vargo, was subsequently verified, to his consequent improvement in the estimation of every one on board the privateer.

"That chap has got stunning topknots on his shoulders!" commented Ringbolt, in a sort of compelled admiration; "blood in his scuppers or not, or I'm a man-hole creeper!"

Val was not too proud to follow the valuable suggestion that Vargo had thrown out, in addition to the shrewd information vouchsafed.

The colors of the schooner were not run up, as was her custom in sighting a prospective prize, and she was even, in accordance with her young commander's orders, rather bunglingly steered and handled, to increase or produce the impression of something essentially mercantile and dull-witted in her character and designs.

"That's the bait!" cried Ringbolt, delightedly, when the effect of these tactics was observable in the action of the man-of-war. "How she begins to brag and bluster already!"

"True enough!" chimed in Mr. Dunbar, who had even less love for a Britisher than he. "Their usual way, blast their insolence! spaniel-like if you show your teeth, bulldoggish when you seem to begin to cower!"

"Up goes her Union Jack!" cried Maltby. "If she's sighted our decks yet, she must take us for a coconut schooner, with fear and trembling in every bone of our bodies."

"Not by a long shot, with so many men on our decks!" observed Val. "Pipe all below, except the day's watch, Mr. Maltby. They can be piped up again fast enough, and our guns are in readiness."

This was accordingly done, while the additional precaution was taken to hide the guns under tarpaulins, giving them the appearance of so much merchandise in bulk.

Vargo had thus far remained silent, since speaking to the good purpose that has been seen.

He now merely pointed far away to the horizon on the port bow, where two motionless, cloud-like objects of a hazy greenish hue uplifted themselves against the sea-line, and said:

"*El Paso del Diablo!* Captain Caliban has a splendid telescope—the best I ever took a squint through, in fact. *Caramba!* he may even now be studying all this from the top of Idol Rock, inside the crooked passage yonder."

As the stranger came nearer, she was noticed to be in such a plight as to her upper works than had been suspected.

Both main and mizzen topmasts had been shot away, more than one sail showed cannon-ball holes through it, her rigging was strung over with sailors repairing it, and, even running before the wind as she was doing, she seemed to be answering her helm indifferently, as if her steering apparatus might be undergoing like repairs.

"The same old story!" chuckled Ringbolt. "Whipped off in one fight, turn around and bully the weakest-looking bystander in the ring!"

A big officer, his uniform ablaze with gold lace, and his cocked hat pulled down domineeringly over his brows, was seen to spring on the fore-trail, trumpet in hand, when hailing proximity was reached.

In the mean time, the big ship was yawing around, her single-decker broadside of twelve

guns grinning threateningly at their open ports, though several of them seemed to be in a dismantled condition, with half her rail in splinters.

Then came the hail, when the vessels were less than three cables' lengths apart, the masked privateer looking little more than a ship's long-boat in comparison with her towering and bulky antagonist-to-be.

"Come closer under our guns!" was thundered through the Britisher's trumpet.

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied Val, in a purposely quivering voice. "You seem to have had rough usage, sir?"

"Never mind that! Have you a pilot on board who knows these islands?"

"Any number of 'em, your Honor."

"Heave to! We'll send a boat."

But, instead of heaving to, the Sprite ran in yet closer, within biscuit-toss in fact, though the work of getting out the man-of-war's boat was under way.

"Why in thunder don't you heave to, as ordered?" bawled the gold-laced skipper, red in the face with anger, while the group of officers around him were scarcely less resplendent and excited.

"Give us a chance, can't you?" was the yet more timorous response.

"Do as you're ordered, or I'll blow you out of the water!" And just here the sloop's long-boat, crammed confusedly with Jack Tars, splashed down from the davits.

"Don't you see I'm trying to, sir? What frigate is that?"

"His British Majesty's sloop-of-war Boreas, blast your insolence!"

"Ah!" And now the schooner was half a cable's length away, with every man on the alert for the signal to spring into action.

"Hold on!" suddenly shouted the Britisher, now for the first time scenting the alarm.

"What schooner are you?"

"The American privateer Spray Sprite, and be hanged to you!" roared Val at last, at the same time giving the anticipated signal.

Then the mask was dropped as if by magic.

The Sprite's broadside spoke with tremendous effect, her decks grew black with cheering braves, and, as she rounded out, her stern-chaser let fly, knocking the ship's entire bowsprit and cat-heads into splinters.

Never was the surprise of a king's ship more absolute or complete.

Each shot of the Sprite's unexpected broadside had dismantled one of the sloop's guns; at the same time that she had rounded out half a dozen hand-grenades were tossed into the approaching boat, exploding therein with murderous effect; and then, almost before a fresh order could be formulated on board the astounded man-of-war, the privateer was rubbing alongside with grapnels out.

"Boarders to the front!" yelled Captain Val, springing forward, sword in hand; and the Boreas was as good as won.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

STAR LUCK.

NOTWITHSTANDING the completeness of their surprise, the sailors of the Boreas made one desperate rally to defend their decks.

But that was all.

A panic among sailors is quite as demoralizing and unaccountable as in an army.

With a blood-curdling yell, the sea-desperadoes from the privateer swept the decks at the first rush, carrying everything before them, and, for all that the resistance was desperate and bloody in spots, in less than five minutes the Boreas was the Sea Sprite's prize, without the loss of a man on the part of the victors.

She was a superb prize at that, a full-rigged, perfectly-manned, splendidly-equipped sloop-of-war, of twenty-six guns and a complement of one hundred and sixty men, officers and crew.

Shortly after the formal surrender of the vessel, when Captain Val and Ringbolt had returned to the poop of the privateer, Vargo, the ex-pirate approached them.

They looked up, in response to his quiet greeting, with signal deference.

Not only was there no remaining trace of the cheap, gasconading ruffian in the man, in keeping with the first impression which he had created on being taken on board, half-delirious from his marooning, but he had just borne himself like a lion in the fight for the possession of the sloop.

A flaring red handkerchief was bound about his head, his right hand, fresh from cutlass-use, was spattered with blood, and the fierce battle-light still illumined his swarthy, bearded face and gleaming eyes, notwithstanding which his manner was controlled and gentle.

"I say, *comandaro!*"

"Yes to you, Vargo!"

"Can you trust me now?"

"With all my heart!" cried Val, cordially grasping one of the ex-pirate's hands, while Ringbolt seized the other.

What cared they if those hands might be stained with a lifetime's crime and blood? They had none the less proved the bravery and fearlessness which must ever evoke the admiration of chivalrous souls. Moreover, it was a bloody

period, a war-age, in which the participants cannot afford to be too fastidious as to their associations and environments.

"Seniors, I thank you!" was Vargo's grave acknowledgment of his generous recognition. "Now, a word of information, if you care to have it."

"Speak!" cried Val.

"There's a sail in sight."

In no little surprise they followed with their eyes the direction of his pointing hand.

A sail, indeed, and evidently that of a large ship, less than ten miles away, and which all hands (except Vargo) had thus far been too busy with their present majestic prize to think of being on the lookout for.

"Your luck stands by you, *comandaro,*" commented Vargo, laconically. "Star-luck, in fact!"

"I'm glad to hear it!" cried Val, heartily.

"But why do you say that, Vargo?"

"*Caramba!* you will want all your force to go into the Pelicans after the Vulture, eh, *comandaro?*"

"True."

"And the disposition of your present prize, with the numerous prisoners considered, might hamper you not a little, eh?"

"You're right there. I've already thought of it."

"Thirty good men as a prize crew!" growled Ringbolt, discontentedly. "Not one less could command her decently."

"*Voila!* as the Frenchmen say," continued Vargo, with another gesture in the direction of the approaching sail. "There is the means out of your dilemma."

"Ha! do you say so?" and Val forthwith leveled a telescope.

"Surely."

"A large ship!"

"Better than that—a frigate!"

"What! another man-of-war?"

"Without a doubt."

"The deuce! I doubt if we can risk surprising another. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, and even blind luck can't go on forever."

"No need hereaway—that is, in a fighting sense."

"What do you mean, Vargo?"

"Yonder frigate is an American."

"True, by Jupiter!" interposed Ringbolt, slapping his thigh. "Yankee-built from water-line to peak-knob! Why in thunder didn't I see it at first glance?"

Again was the forecast of Vargo verified, almost to the letter.

The stranger came within hail by the light of a tropical moon, which made the waters almost as bright as by noonday, though indescribably softened and beautified.

She proved to be the American frigate Vanguard, Captain Biddle,* thirty-two guns and three hundred men, then cruising in the Caribbean with a view to cutting out stray vessels from the large British fleet thought to be cruising thereabouts and in the Gulf of Mexico.

Her officers were not a little amazed at the extent of the prize which the Spray Sprite had succeeded in making so gallantly, and readily agreed to take charge of the captured sloop and prisoners in the interests of the privateer.

This was accordingly done; there was a "night of it" on board both frigate and privateer, during which the necessary explanations and congratulations were interchanged, and by break of day the former, with the other's superb prize in charge, sailed away for the friendly French island port of Martinique, while the Sprite headed direct for the Devil's Pass through the island-cordon of the Pelicans.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DEVIL'S PASS.

A MOUNTAIN island-peak on either hand, crowned with luxuriant tropical verdure from base to crown, and between them a glancing blue inlet, or river of the sea, half a mile wide at the mouth, but narrowing and gradually losing itself amid rocky overhangings, darkling glens and cool green intricacies, suggestively the haunt of every description of gorgeous or dangerous animal life peculiar to the hot solitudes of the Torrid Zone, and which the northern eye dwelt upon with a vague delight and yet vainly strove to penetrate to any great distance.

Such was El Paso del Diablo, the mountain-guarded, greenery-folded sea-gateway through the island circle of the Pelican group into the strange and glassy ocean retreat—a sea within a sea, like a parenthesized or bracketed sentence of occult and mysterious import in the midst of

*The same gallant officer who subsequently lost his life in the distressing disaster to the American frigate Randolph. This frigate, a fine ship of thirty-six guns and three hundred and five men, having sailed from Charleston on a fighting cruise, fell in with the great British frigate Yarmouth, of sixty-four guns and five hundred men, and engaged her in the night. In a short time the Randolph blew up, and her entire ship's company, with the exception of four men, perished. Captain Biddle was universally lamented. He was an officer whose tenacious courage and skill had excited great expectations—*History of the American Revolution.*

a brilliantly-worded and variedly beautiful book-page beyond.

"How shall we make our way in there; without inviting an ambuscade?" thought Captain Val, when the schooner was coming to an anchor just inside the inlet's mouth. "A cannon, mounted and masked almost anywhere along in among those bowery steepes, might sweep us into destruction almost at a breath."

Vargo, who was standing near and observing him intently, seemed to read the import of the unspoken words.

"Señor Comandaro," said he, "I can manage it for you."

Val started.

"Manage what?" he demanded.

Vargo smiled.

"The reconnoitering of the inlet, as a matter of course," he replied. "I don't think Caliban would attempt an ambuscade, but there is nothing like making sure of it."

"That is just what I was turning over in my mind."

"I know it."

"How could you read my thought?"

"Caramba! easily enough. By knowing what you ought to be thinking of at a given time, and under given suggestions, and then splicing inferences together."

"How shall we manage, then?"

"By clambering certain lookouts that I shall lead the way to in yonder," with a gesture toward the interior of the pass. "It will be tough climbing, though, and the sooner it is over the better."

Val at once turned to Ringbolt, and bade him order out a boat.

The three proceeded to the shore together, where, landing in a sandy cove at the base of the mountain to the right of the inlet, they unhesitatingly followed Vargo's guidance up through the dense forest covering the slope.

At last, after a breathless and arduous climb, he led them out into an open glade on the southern side of the mountain, whence, while the mouth of the inlet and the schooner anchored therein were now shut from view, the intricacies of the strait, or passage, were uninterruptedly viewed to a considerable extent, though not for the entire way through to the interior sea—a distance of twenty miles or more, according to Vargo.

From this point the winding shores and jutting steepes were diligently studied with powerful glasses, but the profound odorous solitude seemed absolutely virgin of any human presence, save their own.

But with other animal life it was strangely and beautifully animated.

Almost from their first entrance into the forest gorgeously-plumaged birds had flitted fearlessly here and there around them; monkeys and parrots were chattering, leaping and fluttering everywhere; and even the serpent-life that occasionally made itself manifest was of a fascinatingly-interesting and varied character.

Added to this was the gorgeousness of floral vegetation intermingling with the dark verdure of the primeval forest in bewildering and fantastic form.

But, save for the querulousness of the monkeys and parrots, and an occasional mysterious booming sound, like that of a distant minute-gun, the hush of the solitude would have been painfully, if impressively, apparent.

"It is the silence of nature in her island home, her midmost tropical retreat!" exclaimed Val, at last. "But what is that muffled report that we now and then hear booming through these mighty woods? Hark! there it is again."

"Many a time in the past have I been puzzled by that mysterious sound," replied Vargo, with his somber smile. "But I hit upon its explanation at last."

"What is the explanation?"

"It is caused by the occasional fall of some gigantic tree—some imperial monarch of the primeval woods."

"But what would cause the fall of a tree and so frequently?"

"Old age."

Val looked at him incredulously, while Ringbolt gave his sort of surprised snort.

"Are you in earnest?" asked the former.

"Soberly so, comandaro."

"Why," with a glance around at the circumjacent forest, "the lifetime of many of these mighty trees—probably the majority of them—is doubtless hundreds of years!"

"Granted."

"And we have heard that booming sound four or five times during the two hours we have been in the forest."

"Si, señor."

"How, then, could they perish and fall under the hand of time so rapidly?"

"They do not, but slowly—regularly, each at its appointed time, with its fate fulfilled. It is the vast number of trees that constitutes the seeming frequency of death in their population. Shall I go on with my lecture, señores?"

"By all means," replied Val, while Ringbolt, though of so little sentimental a turn, grew also absorbed; "you interest us."

"Bueno! Say, then, that there are a million trees—a low estimate, I think—upon these two

orested islands, the crashing fall of any one of which, as its sound goes echoing and reverberating amid the gloomy aisles and rock-recesses, might reach our ears, say from a league's distance, or even much more."

"Well?"

"A million—a thousand thousand trees!"

"Yes."

"And supposing they average a lifetime of one thousand years—a high estimate, when you come to lump the various species."

"Well?"

"Bueno! there you are. How many would then naturally perish of old age in the course of each year?"

"Just one thousand!" exclaimed the young privateersman, half-stupefied by the magnitude of the reflection.

"Exactly, or nearly three per day. Or, if you should average the lifetimes of the trees at one hundred years each, that would give the death of ten thousand per year, or say thirty a day. There is nothing like turning things over in one's mind occasionally, Señor Capitan."

Ringbolt slapped his thigh and resumed his examination of the inlet without a word, while Val merely observed, after a pause:

"Vargo, even without considering you as a pirate, you are one of the most extraordinary fellows I ever met."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

EXPLORING THE INLET.

WITHOUT answering, save by his strange smile, which always seemed to have something of sinister mockery in it, Vargo also resumed the examination of the island gateway through his telescope.

"No fear of Caliban's treachery hereabouts," said he, at last. "Do you mark that bald, knob like rock rising out of the water, between those twin green peaks, far away to the south?"

His companions nodded.

"It is *La Roca del Idolo*—Idol Rock," he continued. "Come with me now, Señors Camarados. Another tough climb is before us, after our descent of this mountain. It will enable us to reach one more point of observation, from which the entire remainder of this tortuous seaway will be spread beneath us like a chart."

They followed the strange character's guidance without a single misgiving now.

Pirate, yet a thinker, man of blood and crime, yet a philosopher, doubtless a lifetime's slave of the most lawless passions, and yet more than the average in the domain of thought, and perhaps of genius, what was the secret of the contradiction that seemed to make up this mysterious personality?

As most probably many another before them, both Val and Ringbolt were tempted to put this question to themselves over and over again, without arriving at any satisfactory solution of the problem.

As for Vargo himself, both felt that it would be useless, no less than impertinent, to seek an explanation of him.

If deep and dark as a well, he was secret and impenetrable as the grave; and it might as well be said first as last that Pablo Jesus Santa Maria Dominico Vargo carried his mystery with him undeciphered to the end.

After an hour's tremendous travel through dense woods, in and out of ravines, up and down precipices, and the like, in comparison with which their initial effort was but pastime, Vargo at last triumphantly piloted his companions out upon a broad overhanging platform, midway to the top of a sloping crag of solid verdure hundreds of feet in height, from which the prospect was so magnificent and yet enchanting as to elicit a cry of delight from Val Venture.

"It's worth any man's enthusiasm," said Vargo, grimly, and he stretched forth his hand with a sweeping gesture. "Behold! one of the inner realms of the ocean world—the *sanctum sanctorum* of the tropic sea—is at our feet."

"It beats out a Dutch picture gallery all to pieces!" cried Ringbolt, joyously cutting off a fresh cud of pigtail, and then looking away, while shading his eyes with his hand. "Hallo! is that the ocean again down to the southward yonder?"

"It is the island-girt, the shut-in sea of the Pelicans, that I charted out for you both," was the reply. "But we need look no further in our precautionary quest."

"I see what you mean," observed Captain Val, who had already brought his glass to bear upon the mysterious sea. "Is not that speck, far away on the rim of it, a sail?"

"Yes, comandaro, a receding sail—the wing-tip of the Black Vulture!"

"Sure as a gun!" said Ringbolt. "Vargo, those eyes of yours are distance borers, and no mistake."

"Shouldn't we see the central islands, El Frito, El Carpo and El Sado, from this lookout?" demanded Val.

"Hardly," replied Vargo. "They are deep into the south, besides being less mountainous than where we are, and the Pelican sea is fifty miles and more across. But wait!" he was leveling his own glass now; "there they are—a series of faint bluish blurs upon the sea line!"

Both Ringbolt and Val also managed to locate the objects, and then Vargo began to point out and explain, in his interesting and rather eloquent way, the different features in the more immediate panorama spread out below them.

Idol Rock was especially interesting, a much better view of it being obtained, with the sort of temple on its apex plainly visible.

"See!" continued the pirate, after leveling his glass at the rock in particular: "there is a new cask discernible at the foot of the steep, or I'm mistaken. Yes; *caramba!* John Gabo wasn't the one to neglect the ancient custom."

"How familiar you seem with this solitude!" said Val, in surprise.

"I ought to be. I stood on this very rock-shelf, with my uncle, nearly forty years ago, and have climbed it many a time since."

"Was your uncle also a pirate, Vargo?"

"He was a buccaneer, and a noted one at that."

"But weren't most of the buccaneering chiefs French or English—at least, other than Spaniards?"

"Most of them, yes; but he was partly an exception. He was on the maternal side, with French and even Carib blood in his veins."

"What was his name?"

"I cannot tell you that, though the name would be familiar to you. It is a family vow, you see."

"What was his end?"

"Caramba! there is no secret in that," replied the man, with his horrible composure. "He was boiled to death in oil at Matanzas."

"Good God! for what?"

Vargo shrugged his shoulders.

"Carajo! on general principles, very likely," with indifference. "But then what would you? He had doubtless murdered a priest or two, in the course of his rather lively career, and he was a sad rogue among the ladies, with something of a preference for other men's wives."

And then he proceeded with other reminiscences.

"You remark the grassy patches occasionally opening out among these islands?" he observed.

"Yes."

"Well, they are more numerous than you would suppose. And even I can remember when there were thousands of wild cattle, the property of the buccaneers, on nearly all these islands. *Diablo!* they multiplied like rabbits. All long since destroyed. The Spaniards and the Frenchmen once had a bloody struggle for the proprietorship of the beeves. And the great buccaneer, Henry Morgan, once, and perhaps oftener, viewed the lovely scenes stretching around us, from the very spot on which we are planted."

"It's a pity those fellows couldn't have stuck to beef-raising," commented Val, "instead of pillaging one another's ships and cutting each other's throats so industriously."

Vargo laughed.

"Slow work, slow work! with gold and jewels for the grasping."

And he forthwith burst out in the snatch of a wild song, very much as on the occasion of his first interview with his rescuers from the hot sands of the coral reef.

"Ah, señores!" he added, his dark brow flushing and his somber eyes dancing in his head; "gold is your true prize, after all, gold and its best representative—diamonds and the rest of the sparklers! If I but had the bag of gems in Caliban's possession!"

Both Val and Ringbolt started slightly, but were shrewd enough to dissemble.

"Has Caliban come across so many treasure-ships in the Vulture, then?" asked the young commander.

"Pouf! a few, but what of that? The buried treasure of Blackbeard were worth a navy of 'em, and Caliban has dipped into it!"

"How do you know that?"

"By overhearing a confidential talk between him and John Gabo, his father."

"So!"

"Comandaro, if we make a prize of the Black Vulture, there is one of Caliban's possessions I shall claim a share in—a full third—provided I am chiefly instrumental in bringing it to light."

CHAPTER XL.

VARGO'S STRANGE CHARACTER.

VARGO then went on to give the particulars of a glimpse he had surreptitiously obtained of the contents of the sack of jewels which Caliban had started on his piratical career with.

"He has doubtless already disposed of some of the gems in Morocco and elsewhere," said Vargo, "but there are enough left to constitute a monarch's ransom fifty-fold. *Amigos*, these jewels must be ours—for division among the three of us!"

"How could Caliban have come by them?" asked Val, evasively.

"I could only form a general idea, and that a vague one, from the conversation I overheard by snatches between Gabo and himself."

"What did you infer?"

"That it was a part of the great Blackbeard treasure, which they had unearthed on some island up your way."

"Oho!"

"It must be true, *comandaro*."

"But how did the bulk of the treasure escape them?"

"That I could but indistinctly make out."

"Treachery?"

"Something of the sort. But look here, *amigos*! is it to be share and share alike among the three of us with that sack of jewels?"

"If you capture or bring them to light personally, yes," replied Val, slowly. "Otherwise, they must go into the common fund."

"*Bueno!* that will go."

"But come; had we not better be thinking of returning to our boat? And, besides, it is an ill-omen to count your chickens before they are hatched."

Vargo had forthwith begun to lead the way down the steep.

"The Vulture crowd are over a hundred, and they will fight like devils out of hell," he admitted. "But, under my guidance, you can't help giving them a surprise, which is ever the half of a victory."

"They must know of our being close upon their track, though," said Val. "Our engagement with the *Loreas* must have given that much away."

"True, *comandaro*; but there is one thing they cannot know or suspect."

"And that is—"

"That I, Pablo Jesus Santa Maria Dominico Vargo, am still alive and with you."

"Ah, to be sure!"

"*Si, señor!* And my plan of attack, if faithfully followed—once we have the Vulture safely ensconced in fancied security among the three star isles—cannot fail."

"What is your plan, in a general way, Vargo?"

"That of a treble attack—two by land (over the islands, you know), and one by water."

"But will not Gabo be apt to provide against this?"

"No; for he is not sufficiently well informed. He knows the water-retreat, into which he will not hesitate to pilot the Vulture at once; but, once there, he will deem his position impregnable. A mistake!"

"You are sure of this?"

"Trust me. Caliban and Gabo will only provide against pursuit by water. They do not know what I do."

"What is that?"

"That each island-mountain, which will surround them in their central retreat, is threaded by a secret canyon, through which I can lead in an absolute surprise upon them. Trust in me."

"We're going to; that stands."

"*Gracias!*"

"But I don't exactly understand. Why should these secret passes be known to you alone, Vargo?"

"They are known to others—a few others, but not to John Gabo; and, as for Caliban himself, I am certain he has never been among the Pelicans before."

"But might not some of the Vulture's crew be into the secret?"

"No; I know them all, every man-devil of them. They're a wild lot, the offscourings of the seas, for the most part, with many a veteran bravo and cut-throat among 'em. But to only two pirate ships were those secret passes ever made known by the Caribs, some few of whom maybe subsisting to this day in the inaccessible island caves. And of those two corsair ships I am the sole survivor."

"The sole survivor?"

"Yes; they were companion rovers—the *Avenger* and the *Condor*. Aha, aha! Those were red-letter days. But before we went under we made the salt water boil. Our biggest job was right in yonder, among the sister islands, where we are going to snare the Vulture."

"How was that?"

"Two rich West Indianmen, a Dutchman and a Genoese, well-manned, fled into the Pelicans, and joined forces to beat us off. By the purest accident, they got into the very retreat the Vulture is heading for now, and thought to laugh at us."

"At first we feared they could do so in security, for we had been entrenched in the same nook ourselves, and imagined, as they did, that the position was impregnable."

"*Diablo!* but there was where our work upon the Caribs came into play."

"After we had toasted their chief and his three wives over a hot fire for some time, besides burning up one of the babies before its mother's eyes, the tawny rascals naturally grew more communicative than at first."

"Then they showed us through the secret passes, and we made our combined attacks."

"*Por Dios!* but the sharks were banqueted finely that day. We didn't spare a man of 'em, and there were ladies enough to go around among the captains and mates, into the bargain."

"Maledictions! piracy is in the decalogue."

sorrowfully. "The times that are gone are gone forever."

Val and Ringbolt, who were following Vargo's able guidance through the woods, while he thus chatted self-complacently of his past adventures, could not help looking at the man in both wonder and horror.

Man, vampire, demon, or all combined—which? they asked of themselves; but with as much confusion at characterizing him truly as before.

"A brave experience, truly!" exclaimed Val, at last.

Vargo was insensible to the shuddering irony in the words.

"Wasn't it, though?" he cried, stopping an instant to kill a snake in his path with his staff, and then leading on again. "*Por Dios!* the light and joy of existence seems passing out of the world."

"What became of the *Avenger* and the *Condor*?"

"The former went to Hades in a great hurricane off the Barbadoes. Such a pity, too! with the treasure she had on board."

"We of the *Condor* witnessed her doom, but could render no assistance."

"In less than a month our own case was no better."

"An English frigate knocked us into kindling-wood, and gave no quarter."

"I was the only one that escaped, managed to set myself adrift in the darkness."

"How I escaped the sharks, has never ceased to be a wonder to me. On the following day, however, my star was again in the ascendant."

"Was picked up by an Italian barque, the second mate and two fore-castle hands of which proved to be old comrades of mine, likewise down in their rover's luck."

"It was beautiful! In three days we had mutinied, tossed the skipper, his first officer, and some other unreasonable chaps, to the sharks, and the barque was our own under the bonny black flag."

"Nothing like head-work in such things, and, after I had been chosen *comandaro*, the luck continued."

"The very next day we surprised and captured a Portuguese corvette; transferred our flag to her, enlisted such of her crew as we hadn't killed in our venture, burnt the barque behind us; and lo! we were in fighting trim, with the blue water for our hunting-ground. Hurrah! hurrah! brave days! bold days!"

And then, for a change, this cheerfully reminiscient adventurer burst into a stanza of the old hunting-song:

"A stag strayed down to the fountain's brink,
Sleek and gallant as ever you saw;
But I of a redder warm tide would drink,
As my dagger I draw, as my dagger I draw!
I leaped at his throat, like a wolf of the wood,
I plunged my hands in his heart's hot blood.
Huzza! huzza!"

"Vargo," interposed Val Venture, coldly, "you are more sensational, but less attractive, than you were."

"Oh, *comandaro!* a lottery, a bagatelle. But brave days, brave days!"

"Perhaps so; but you seem to have overlooked one important possibility."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE MYSTERIOUS SEA.

VARGO looked up in no little surprise.

"What may I have overlooked, *comandaro*?" he inquired.

"You say that the Caribs of the central islands showed you the secret of their passes?"

"*Si, señor;* for a certainty."

"And there is a probability of a remnant of the tribe still subsisting there?"

"Like enough; I doubt if we killed quite all of them; though our intentions and endeavors were conscientiously painstaking to that laudable end."

"Very well; and what is to prevent some of the lingering wretches from revealing the mountain passes to Gabo and Caliban, as their predecessors did to you and your highly conscientious *confrères*? Especially if they should be humanely treated, in lieu of being roasted over hot coals, or having their babies burned before the maternal eyes?"

Vargo seemed much struck by this suggestion.

"However," he said, brightening up after a thoughtful pause, "what would our enterprise amount to without a few chances, more or less, against its success? Oh, it will swim, *comandaro*, or it will sink; and it is but a shake of the dice with the devil, after all!"

His companions were relieved enough when the edge of the water was at last reached at a point whence a few pistol-shots, as preconcerted signals, soon brought the schooner's boat to the spot, for their horror of their guide had by this time completely effaced the more agreeable interest with which certain phases of his contradictory characteristics had temporarily inspired them.

The work of towing the *Spray Sprite* through the inlet with boats aided by sweeps, was at once got under way.

This was rendered necessary by the narrow

mountain-hemmed and tortuous nature of the strait, where the light but fair westerly wind that was prevailing could be taken advantage of only by fits and starts.

"Well, Captain Val, what do you think of our ex-pirate now?"

The question was propounded by Ringbolt to the young commander on an occasion of their being alone in the privateer's cabin together at about noon of the same day, when the passage of the inlet was in progress.

Val looked up with something of a troubled air.

"I hardly know what to think of him," he replied. "What is your opinion, Tom?"

"There you've got me, my hearty!" and the old veteran seated himself at the chart-table beside Val and plunged his hands deep into his capacious pockets, after a custom of his when on meditation sagely bent. "I'm just all at sea as to that cuss, or, as you might say, betwixt and between a white squall on my weather-bow and breakers on my lee."

"I can't help thinking the fellow is more devil than man," said Val, moodily.

"That's it!" snorted the other. "Split my sky-scrappers if I ain't half afeard he may prove as bad for us as Vanderdecken's demon pilot of the *Flying Dutchman*!"

"Not so bad as that, I trust," said Val, with a smile. "We must be everlastingly watchful, that is all."

"I should say so."

"He will have control of nothing, you know; and one or the other of us can be at his side constantly."

"But how will that help us out if he isn't human at all, but a regular out and out—a sea-devil, you know?"

"I don't know anything of the sort. Suppose you talk sense!"

"All right then, my hearty!" good-humoredly. "But there's just one prime precaution that we must keep a weather-eye for, sleeping or waking."

"What is that?"

"In case we do whip out the pirates—" And Ringbolt fastened his eyes significantly upon his companion.

"Yes; well, in case we do?"

"Then will be the time, mark my words, when Mr. Don Matthew Mark Luke and John Vargo will require the most watching."

"Oh, yes; as to the spoils."

"More than that!"

"What do you mean?"

Ringbolt lowered his voice to the hoarse whisper he so liked when desirous of being particularly impressive.

"As to the ladies!"

Val started, and then nodded his acquiescence in the impression.

The thought was not new with him any more than with his companion.

Here there was a step on the companionway, and both dissembled their thoughts as Vargo entered the cabin.

He seemed in particularly good spirits, and suggested a nip of grog, in which the first mate joined him with an air of assumed cordiality.

"It's worth your while to be on deck, *amigos*," said the Spaniard, after he had lighted a fragrant *Cabaña* offered by Val. "We are passing *La Roca del Idolo*, and the antics of the monkeys are alone worth smiling at."

They accordingly went on deck together.

A rocky cone, sand-rimmed and forest-belted at the base, but thence shooting up in a bald bare peak, hundreds of feet high, and crowned with a collection of erect, partly-roofed stones resembling a cromlech of Druidical remains—such was *Idol Rock*.

On the sandy beach at its foot were numerous casks and skeletons of casks, together with the remains of camp-fires, one of them not long since dead and scattered—relics of rude piratical offerings to the superstition of the spot.

All around the land-locked ocean-strait, here at narrowest and crookedest towered the savage yet beautifully emerald cliffs and steepes—

"In the wild pomp of mountain majesty!"—

festooned with running vines of enormous trumpet-shaped scarlet flowers, and fairly teeming with monkey and parrot life, till the chattering din was occasionally all but distracting.

It was "a monkey-and-parrot time" on a monster scale and with indefinite suggestive-ness.

Then parti-colored cockatoos flitted here and there; blood-red flamingoes fluted up, like living flames, from the reedy banks; humming-birds, like animated rubies, emeralds and topazes, or the several jewels combined, were as thick among the flowering vines as honey bees over a Northern clover-field in June; while the sinister presence of sharks and alligators along the surface of the greenish-crystal, deep-flowing waters was relieved by shoals of purple mullet, gold-fish, fire-sealed snappers, and the silver-bellied, green-spined bonito, and hundreds of equally beautiful marine creatures.

The schooner was being pulled past the *Idol Rock*, within a brief distance of the beach when Vargo, who was standing aft with Val

and several others, suddenly turned to the young man.

"Surely, *comandaro*," he said, "you'll not pass on without broaching a cask of wine on the beach yonder, in propitiation of the deity or devil of the locality?"

"Surely that is just what I will do," was the cold reply. "Deities or devils, accustomed to being propitiated by pirates, will have to rub along without any similar nonsense on my part."

To his surprise, Vargo, though attempting to laugh off the matter, appeared to be really alarmed at the thought of neglecting the superstitious custom.

He even went to the steward's cabin, and, returning with a bottle of wine, tossed it ashore, so that it broke and spilled its contents upon a jagged stone; after which he muttered something to himself in an inaudible voice, and seemed considerably relieved, as if he had performed a duty whose neglect might have brought him misfortune.

In about the middle of the afternoon the passage of the wild mountain gateway of the sea ended.

At a sudden turn between two mighty cliffs, the estuary was seen to suddenly spread out, broad and calm and bright, and then there was the mysterious inclosed sea of the Pelicans, calm as a summer lake, apparently as limitless as the ocean itself, isolated and lonely as a dream.

Not a sail was to be seen, for the time being not even a sea-bird flashed its white wing, and at first there was an instinctive feeling that

"They were the first that ever burst
Into that lonely sea,"

after the manner of that crime-driven, corpse-companioned Ancient Mariner of the poet's creation.

But this sensation was soon dissipated, when, after drifting out from under the shore-cliffs, the breeze from the northwest, seemingly freshening after its languorous passage through the seductive but enervating beauties of that devious tropical gateway of the summer seas, took the bold privateer on her starboard quarter with a rush, and, spreading her snowy pinions, she swept off hopefully into the silent, sun-lighted wonders of the unknown deep.

Then the white gulls began to dip and swoop around her in silent, restral flocks, the flying-fish to flash hither and thither—those sparkling butterflies of the ocean meads—the spray to spring and shower against the speeding prow; and just as the sun was trembling at his imperial retirement behind the gold and purple curtains of his western couch, the north headland of El Frito, the nearest of the star sister isles, was sighted by the lookout in the crow's-nest.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE SISTER ISLES.

VARGO had not exaggerated the beauty of the three sister or companion islands centrally embosomed in the silences of this strange sequestered sea.

It was by moonlight—the brilliant, all but dazzling moonlight of the tropics—that the Spray Sprite came to an anchor at the mouth of the lagoon penetrating in between the two northernmost islands of the trio, while miles beyond, due south, but perfectly outlined and exquisitely clear-cut against the crystal blue-black of the star-studded firmament, with that peerless constellation, the Southern Cross, scintillating against its dark shoulder, like a rich pendant in an Ethiop's ear, rose the superior peak of El Sado, the larger and loftier of the group, the rest of it being hidden from view by the intervening mountain paradises, as you might say.

The landscapes nearer at hand were indescribably soft and beautiful.

Val Venture had visited the South Pacific in one of his boyish voyager with his seafaring father, and could well remember the impression produced upon his mind by Otahite, Typee and other picturesque isles of the famed Society and Marquesas groups.

But these recollections were dimmed to commonplace before the richer and more seductive beauty of the ocean Edens now presented to his wondering and fascinated view.

Suddenly a voice broke upon the reverie in which he had been silently giving himself up to the delicious contemplation of an hour or more.

It was Vargo's voice.

"A glorious spot, *comandaro*!" said the strange man, in a subdued, and yet half-eager voice. "Do I disturb your meditations unpleasantly?"

"No, not necessarily," replied the young man, slowly and reluctantly. "Besides, we've got to come to the harsh, practical side of this business sooner or later."

"And the sooner the better, eh?" And Vargo, with his voice softened yet more musically, seated himself unobtrusively at Val's side. "Well, no, not necessarily in our case. We can take

our time, and if we attack day after to-morrow, it will be better for the delay."

"You really counsel such delay?" in surprise.

"Si, señor; and I will give you satisfactory reasons later on. In the mean time, you can rest assured of one thing: That the Vulture can't escape us without destroying us. Buried in the bosom of yonder lagoon, in fancied security, as she deems herself, she is, nevertheless, in a *cul de sac*, which has no other available entrance or egress than the mouth of the lagoon before us."

"You surprise me."

"Yes! Well, I know the separating waters like a written page. They have other mouths than the one before us, but extremely shallow, narrow, and dammed by fallen trees. Here we have only to be on our guard against a before-hand attack on the part of the entrapped pirates—by whom our every movement is by this time being jealously watched, we may depend upon it—and bide our opportunity, which I will presently offer to your consideration."

Val was relieved of no little anxiety at learning this, and said so.

Thereupon Vargo, who was once more making himself companionable and interesting, began to point out and explain the features of the fairy-like scene spread out before them in such an eloquent and entertaining manner that he soon had a dozen or more auditors, in addition to the young commander.

"Oh!" cried the mysterious adventurer, at last; "there is nothing like an island refuge after a bitter and storm-tossed life. The islands under our gaze put me in mind of one yet lovelier, if that were possible, that I visited in the far South Seas."

"I say, *camarados*, you wouldn't deem me capable of composing rhymes, and in English, too, eh? *Caramba!* it is true, though. Let me see; didn't I hear a guitar twanging in the forecastle the other day? To be sure I did. If I had it now I might amuse you a bit."

The guitar belonged to the cook, a musically-inclined Georgia negro.

It was produced on the spot, and then, wonderful to relate, the incomprehensible pirate swept its chords with a rare delicacy of musical touch; and, while he did so to a pleasant accompaniment, he chanted, rather than sung, in a singularly mellow and powerful voice, as follows:

"The ocean hath many an Eden-isle springing
Dewy and green from its bosom of blue,
But to none are the spice-winds more balmily
bringing
Their soft-wafted scents than to fair Pitahu.
In its grottoes of coral the mermaids are singing,
Or they sweep their gold harps as they float in
the foam,
And from coral-red lips the brown maidens are
flinging
Love-kisses to welcome the wanderer home."

"Behold, the glad breakers their snow-plumes are
tossing
Where the sea's bosom swells on the foam-bur-
ied reef!
Pull, mariners, pull! there's the smooth inner
crossing,
Whose passage is Paradise—rapture—relief.
Pull, mariners, pull! for afar on the highland
The trees of the bread-fruit are blown to the
breeze.
Pull, mariners, pull for God's bright golden island,
The throne of pure passion, the pearl of the
seas!"

Vargo came to a pause with a self-deprecating laugh, but with his eyes bent searchingly up into the darkling vistas of the lagoon.

"*Caramba!*" he muttered, half-absently; "this will never do. You'll think me a mooning driver of a poet."

"Go on! Continue!" insisted several voices, while Val, for one, had been listening half-entranced. "That is sweeter than a song, Vargo, and better than yarn-spinning!"

"As you will, then."

And shrugging his shoulders carelessly, but with his gaze still bent far away up the lagoon, he went on with his chant or recitation:

"Lightly an, brightly those twin peaks are soaring,
And soft are the glens that are nestled between,
Those thin, dreamy hills from the purple cliffs
pouring
Are sweeter and purer than famed Hippocrene.
Where feathery palms with tall cocoanuts mingle,
The valley sweeps up in soft, velvety lawns,
Which are lost in a dream of deep grotto and
dingle
Of Asphodel bright as Olympian dawns."

Again the rhymes came to a pause, and the leveled gaze of the pirate was bent yet more piercingly over the schooner's rail.

"Why don't you continue?" said some one, impatiently. "What are you mooning at, Vargo?"

"Hush!" he cautioned, warningly. "And while I continue with my rhymes, watch, without appearing to do so, yonder lagoon."

"Are you in earnest?" demanded Captain Val.

"Yes; there is one boat-load of men, at least, spying upon us from the inner shadows yonder. I'm prepared for anything, but don't let them suspect that they are observed. Now I will continue."

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN ATTEMPTED SURPRISE.

IT seemed extremely fantastic and unreal that Vargo should calmly go on with his eloquent versifying in the midst of such peril, and perhaps on the very threshold of an attempted surprise-attack on the part of the ambushed pirates of the Black Vulture, and also that his auditors should retain their calm presence of mind under the same exciting circumstances.

But such was, nevertheless, the fact.

Not the faintest sign of alarm was evinced, and yet every eye was covertly fixed upon the lagoon, while the mellifluous and passionate recitation, blent with the rich tinkling of the guitar, was continued:

"Pull, mariners, pull! the dark past we banished
When our Corsair's black banner was dipped in
the wave:
Each bravo is sleeping, our trim bark has van-
ished,
We only are left of the hardy and brave.
Pull, mariners, pull! Life's a soon-scattered cap-
ture,
Love is a lie, and grim death but a dream!
The Present is here, where red life leaps in rap-
ture
To the loveliest isle on Time's mystical stream!"

"Hu! za! but a stroke, and the reef is behind us!
Another, we flash through the spray white and
dim!
And here sweep the sirens whose charms are to bind
us,
Their long hair afloat on the sea as they swim.
Their shrill, childish laughter rings wildly before
them,
As a bird's voice excels the swift beat of its
flight:
How they glide through the glass of the waves
swinging o'er them,
Their tender limbs glancing a moment to light!"

"Hist!" and once more the recitation came to a pause, while the rhymers' head bent forward warningly. "That boat again—or was it a second one? Never mind yet. All is in readiness, I presume, *comandaro*?"

Val nodded, and, at a sign from him, Maltby, the boatswain, who was one of the listening group, strolled away forward, with assumed carelessness, but in reality to put every privateer quietly on his guard.

And then, just as smoothly as if there had been no interruption, the recitation went on:

"Here are Koolah, Saldee, and the merry witch Ko-
rah,
And that was the flash of Kaleetah's bright heel;
There are deep-eyed Meelile, and the red-lipped La-
morah,
And Mee'a has slipped, like a fish, 'neath the
keel!
Sweet nymphs of the ocean, bright maids of the
billow,
Pour, pour the wild wine of your kisses for me—
These glens for our gladness, these vales for our
pillow—
Till my heart's golden goblet foams crimson and
free!"

"Back oars, lads! Give way, now! There—crash! we have landed,
And our sea-darlings dance on the sheet-jeweled
shore;
Leave battered boat there in the cove where she's
stranded,
Break oar, stave in bottom, our travail is o'er!
Come, sweet, to you spot where the palm-clusters
cover
The head of this fountain that foams at our feet.
The Sun is our sire, and each mad hearted lover
May drink the delight of this perfect retreat."

"For the ocean hath many an Eden-isle springing,
Dewy and green, from its bosom of blue,
But to none are the spice-winds more balmily bring-
ing
Their soft-wafted scents than to fair Pitahu.
In its grottoes of coral the mermaids are singing,
Or they sweep their gold harps as they float in the
foam,
And from coral-red lips the brown maidens are fling-
ing
Love-kisses to welcome the wanderer home!"

He closed with a wild burst of joyous song, the guitar meantime twanging loudly, and, even while he sung, it seemed, hurled forth these final words of warning from between his warbling lips:

"Be ready! There is not only one boat, but three, and—*here they come!*"

Hurling the guitar to one side, he was on his feet in an instant, cutlass and pistol in hand.

The rest of the group were with him, for at this instant the three boats, crammed with desperadoes, burst from cover less than two cables' lengths away, and, evidently sure of taking the schooner by surprise, came on fairly rushing through the water, the inmates sounding their onset with a blood-curdling yell.

But the privateer was on the defensive as if by magic.

The boatswain's whistle screamed, men swarmed to their posts, and above all rung out the clear, commanding voice of the young captain:

"Hoist away! Man the guns! Starboard all hands, to repel boarders! Steady there!"

A faltering hush had suddenly fallen upon the attacking boats, on their inmates perceiving that neither a surprise nor panic had been excited on board the privateer, though they continued to foam through the water with a tremendous rush.

Then the schooner's bow-gun and two starboard pieces opened upon them with ball, shrapnel and cannister, and at such short range as almost to blow them out of the water.

There was a ringing tuzza, and then, instantly following the thunder and flash of the cannon, the privateer's entire starboard side fairly spouted and blazed as the musketry volleyed forth.

"Blood for blood! bravos to the front!" the deep, sonorous voice of Caliban was heard above the chorus of yells, curses and scattering shots that ensued. "Give way there! Grapple 'em on!"

But every privateersman had been provided with an extra musket.

The second volley followed the first, almost like an echo, to be succeeded in a breath by a second discharge of the three guns, so rapidly had they been reloaded.

Not a pirate got to the schooner's side.

At the clearing of the smoke, two of the boats were perceived backing oars in panic-stricken confusion.

The inmates of the third were already struggling in the water, with the sharks busily snapping them up and dragging them under; while it was equally evident that the short-range firing from the schooner had effected terrible execution among the remainder.

In five minutes the pirates had wholly disappeared, and the placid surface of the moon-silvered water was undisturbed save by the eager darting here and there of an ominous black fin or two in among the red streaks left by the mutilated and devoured victims.

The attempted surprise-attack had been made and beaten back, without the loss of a man or the reception of a scratch on the part of the defenders.

"*Caramba!* they won't repeat that experiment, now that we've been found so wide-awake," coolly commented Vargo, a little later on. "Our lookout guards should be merely doubled, and after that a dog-watch might take care of us for at least the remainder of this night."

Every precaution was taken, the majority of the crew sleeping on their arms, but he was right.

The attack was not repeated.

On the following day, with Tom Ringbolt and Mr. Dunbar at either hand, Vargo, out of his grim experience in the past, laid before Captain Val his plan for attacking the pirates in their island fastness.

It was bold and shrewd, and such was the confidence with which the strange character of its offerer had now inspired everybody on board the privateer that it was adopted forthwith.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A WELL-PLANNED ATTACK.

THE plan for attacking the pirates in their stronghold may be briefly stated as follows:

The entire attack force, which would include a hundred fighting participants, with just enough men left as a sufficient guard upon the schooner, would simultaneously advance up the lagoon.

This demonstration, it was deemed, would cause such pirates as might be on watch to hastily carry the news of it to the brigantine, which Vargo knew to be concealed in a spacious opening of the lagoon almost entirely shut in by the three precipitous island-banks about a mile from its mouth.

This diversion having been effected, one boat's crew would secretly land on El Frito, to the left, under cover of the vegetation, while the others would merely lie upon their oars, watchful and alert.

The land party, under Vargo's individual guidance, was then to plunge directly into the wooded bosom of the mountain.

He would conduct them by the secret pass, with which he alone was supposed to be familiar, up among the difficult intricacies of the mountain, to a wild platform of rock known as the Eyrie.

This directly overlooked the basin in which the brigantine would be found lying. It was the chief spot from which Vargo and his cruel associates in the past had successfully bombarded their unsuspecting victims, while their companions had been enabled to creep up the lagoon and co-operate by water.

This plan was to be repeated on the present occasion.

A twenty-four pound swivel-gun had been dragged up to the Eyrie, and used with signal effect, its firing being also the signal for the water attack from the lagoon.

Vargo doubted not that this swivel gun was still at the Eyrie in an excellent state of preservation, together with rounds of ammunition, sufficient for the present emergency.

All had been thus left by the participants in the former attacks, after both gun and ammunition had been amply protected against the exigencies of the climate.

The gun would doubtless be found there in such condition that it could be speedily brought into action upon the brigantine far below.

If not, showers of musketry from the masked

rocks above would be made to answer the purpose of the desired surprise and diversion.

In any event, the echoing of the shots would be the signal for the boats to pull up the lagoon, and the pirates would thus find themselves attacked both on the surface and from above.

He was confident that the surprise could be made so complete as to render an easy capture of the pirate a speedy result.

"Isn't it expecting too much, though," demanded Val, when the plan was under discussion, "to suppose that this culverin, together with the ammunition for serving it, should be found intact after all these years?"

"Not when you consider how we protected it," replied Vargo. "Everything was thoroughly tarpaulined, and, moreover, the Eyrie itself is roofed by an immense overhanging rock."

"But the natives, the Caribs, in case some of them should have discovered it in the interim?"

"*Carajo!*" with a laugh; "they will have regarded it as an idol, or some new and distinguished devil in their mythology. At all events, trust me for their having religiously respected the strange object, without too close an examination. But this is begging a difficulty, as you might say; for I doubt if there is a single Carib left alive on El Frito."

"You do?"

"*Si, señor.* A few of the black rascals may be haunting the forests of the two other islands, which are the larger and more fertile. But I doubt if any remain on El Frito. However, it would make no difference."

"But suppose we should find the culverin useless?"

"*Caramba!* what is the matter with our muskets, then? Volley after volley, showered down from the Eyrie upon the brigantine, would answer our purpose almost equally well."

As has been stated, it was finally agreed that Vargo's plan of attack should be acted upon.

"Still," said Val, when the decision had been announced, "this plan is somewhat less elaborate than the first one you outlined for me."

"How is that, *comandaro?*"

"There were to be three attacks—two by land and one by water—in your original proposition."

"Ah, I remember. But look you, *comandaro*, one thing had then escaped my mind—the fact that I cannot be in two places. True, there is another secret pass over yonder on El Carpo, and it is equally well known to me. But there is no one else capable of guiding a third force thitherway. Moreover, the Eyrie is the best vantage-point, and don't you think it best, after all, not to divide your attacking force any more than I now propose?"

This was very sensible, and no further discussion was had.

Early on the following morning, in accordance with this plan, the three boat-loads of men silently quitted the privateer.

Val had determined to accompany the land force, and therefore personally commanded the boat containing the twenty-five men designed for that service.

The two remaining boats were commanded by Ringbolt and Dunbar respectively.

Vargo had announced that about one hour would be required by the land party in reaching the Eyrie and firing the first gun from that point, which was to be the signal for the boats to pull up the lagoon for all they were worth, and combine in an attack upon the Black Vulture wherever found.

The tropical morning was just on the point of breaking, and the dark, silent lagoon was only broken by the dip of the muffled oars.

A quarter of a mile up, the landing was effected, and Vargo at once led his party straightway through the apparently trackless forest, just as the newly-risen sun poured his brightness down through the tree-tops with as much brilliancy as was his wont, though the woodland ways were always more or less dim even at mid-day.

Openings in the forest soon appeared, however, and thence the path of the adventurers was over a broken and grassy country to the foot of the mountain.

Here, however, an unlooked-for check was experienced.

Astute in most things, the Spaniard had been strangely out in his estimate of the Caribs.

A large band of them, naked, painted, screaming like demons, and armed with javelins and bows and arrows, unexpectedly leaped out of a ravine, and attacked the intruders with great fury.

"Steady, but don't fire!" shouted Vargo, in a rage. "Curse the niggers! one good charge will settle 'em!"

But neither one good charge nor even a stand was made.

An unaccountable, though momentary, panic had seized upon the sailors, and, do what Val and Vargo might to encourage them, they broke and fled for the cover of a thicket out of which they had but recently emerged, with the despised Caribs in hot pursuit.

Furious with rage and mortification, Val cut down one of his individual assailants—there

were two, as he manfully stood his ground—and, after warding off the spear of the other, he put him to flight.

Then he missed his footing upon a slippery root, and fell headlong into a shallow ravine.

Scrambling out of it, unhurt, he looked around him, to find himself, much to his astonishment, the sole possessor of the inglorious field.

Caribs and sailors had alike disappeared in the adjoining thickets, whence he could hear their shouts, but, fortunately, thus far no shots, otherwise the boats might have deemed them the preconcerted signal, though less than half the stipulated hour had elapsed since the landing had been effected.

After a moment's hesitation, Val turned, and proceeded directly up into the mountain.

CHAPTER XLV.

ERRANT FORTUNE.

"THE cowards!" muttered the young privateersman between his teeth. "I'll try my luck at chancing upon the secret pass alone, and firing the signal from the Eyrie single-handed."

He had also prudently reflected, however, that any other course than this one for the time being might bring him in contact with the entire body of the Caribs, so that his present determination was less foolhardy than might appear at the first glance.

But a tremendous and most astonishing revelation was in store for him—in fact, a series of revelations.

In the first place, after following up the ravine which his party had seemed about to enter, when ambuscaded, for a considerable distance, without meeting with any adventure save from an occasional serpent, a troop of skipping and screaming monkeys, or perhaps some more formidable wild animal, slinking sullenly away at his blundering approach, he had a very steep and long climb, when the gorges suddenly opened out into what seemed a vast natural amphitheater of bristling crags, overrun by wild and fantastic vegetation in prodigious luxuriance, through which a small stream of clear, pure water was brawling and tumbling.

At this point Val judged that he must have penetrated more than half-way up and through the mountain.

After slaking his thirst at the brook, for the sun was stifling hot in the gorge, without a breath of air, Val glanced curiously around to take in his new bearings.

To his surprise, he almost instantly became aware of a small hut—savage and rude enough, but manifestly a human habitation, notwithstanding—perched in a wild coign of the towering cliff to his right, and not far from the top.

A rude stair-like path seemed to invite one up to it, and this he lost no time in availing himself of, though with due wariness.

Arriving at last on the rocky shelf supporting the cabin, he was surprised to hear the murmur of voices from within.

His surprise was naturally increased when, upon peering through a chink of the hut he perceived a man, apparently wounded, stretched upon a pallet of green boughs, and a comely young Carib woman bending sympathetically over him.

The man, whose face Val could not at first distinguish in the dim light of the interior, was evidently a seafaring man of some consequence, judging by his attire. The pair were conversing in low tones, apparently in the Spanish or Portuguese tongue, judging by the few words that reached the young man's ears.

After hesitating a moment, Val stepped to the door of the hut, spoke the words, "*Dios y paz!*"—God and peace!—and abruptly entered.

The Indian woman—whose graceful figure was entirely nude, except for a girdle or short petticoat of feather-work reaching from the waist to the knees—started up, with a low cry of alarm, and, darting around the intruder for the door, instantly disappeared.

The man rose into a sitting posture, made a feeble but ineffectual effort to snatch up a pistol lying at his side, and looked at the new-comer with wide-staring eyes and certain irrelevant words in Spanish suggestive of his not being wholly in his right mind.

Val, on recognizing him, had started back in astonishment.

"John Gabo!" he exclaimed.

John Gabo it was, sure enough—corpse-like and almost irretrievable from physical suffering, and with his head half buried away in bandages of blood-stained rags, but John Gabo just the same.

He only glared in response, and then said, wanderingly, in Spanish:

"Who are you? I don't know you. Why did you frighten Kalah away? Go away, or I will kill you! I have killed many in my time. You spoke my name. Yes; John Gabo—John Gabo, the pirate. But wait; I had forgotten. I am the steward, the confidential man of Captain Ferris, my old shipmaster. Fetch him to me, for my head hurts me—oh, so much, so much!" with a deep groan, accompanied by an agonized distortion of the features. "Well, then, fetch Kalah back to me. Or, still better, fetch Santa Marguerita and the younger saint,

Santa Mabel! They will cure me, or they will confess me of my sins before I die. They are angels. Go for them, but do not tell Caliban. He might be angry. Go for them—go, go, or I will kill you!”

He fell back, exhausted and breathing painfully.

A series of revelations, or, rather, of hopeful possibilities, had flashed through Val's mind as the result of the piecing together of these wild and wandering words.

Gabo had, perhaps, been wounded in the pirates' unsuccessful attack upon the schooner, and had subsequently been both captured and befriended by the Caribs, to judge by his present position, and the kindness of the native girl—the Kalah of his vague demands.

This much might be gathered by the man's ravings, but what more, in respect to his allusions to the two saintly women, by which it was obvious that he meant the Widow Venture (whose Christian name was Margaret) and Mabel?

Had they, too, succeeded in quitting the brigantine, or were those allusions to them mere remembrances of their presence in former scenes?

At all events, the young commander found his heretofore revengeful feelings against this criminal and miserable man melt away before the deplorable condition in which he was found.

He sprang to the invalid's side. Besides a flask of brandy, he had also with him a canteen which he had filled with cold water from the brook at the bottom of the gorge.

By causing the sufferer to swallow some of the spirits, and bathing his brow copiously, he soon succeeded in somewhat invigorating his exhausted frame, though his mind still remained clouded.

“Come, Mr. Gabo!” cried Val, propping the man up in a sitting posture again, and speaking encouragingly; “I am here now, as your friend, much as you may have endeavored to wrong me in the past. Surely, you can remember me?”

But Gabo only stared vacantly, and shook his head.

“But try now!” persisted the young man. “I am Val Venture. Don't you remember how I used to play around Captain Hiram's boat-landing when I was a little shaver, though I was always so timid of Caliban, with his great strength and fierce temper? Try to place me in your memory.”

Still Gabo couldn't or wouldn't remember, and he only pushed the young man to one side, or feebly endeavored to do so.

“Go, go!” he muttered, vaguely, with angry impatience; “fetch me Kalah; or, still better, fetch me Santa Marguerita and Santa Mabel!”

“What of those two?” cried Val, with painfuleagerness. “Are they still on the brigantine, or somewhere in the forest?”

“Go, go! what odds? *Caramba!* you would not fetch them.”

“Yes, I would! Only try me—tell me where they are!”

“Bah! Caliban would not let you.”

“Ha! they are still Caliban's captives on the Black Vulture, then?”

“No, no, no! Maledictions on the Black Vulture! No piracy for me—all a bad dream! I'm a good man now—I'm Captain Hiram's land steward—ask Santa Marguerita if it isn't true! I shall kiss her Bible, and confess my sins to her, and go to heaven. They told me so. Ask Santa Marguerita and Santa Mabel. They will tell you.”

“But where are they?” desperately. “How can I fetch them to you, Gabo, when you will not say where they are?”

“But, tell me this first. Is Caliban very, horribly furious because they escaped into the mountain?”

“Ha! they have escaped then?”

Here a movement behind him caused Val to turn quickly.

Kalah, the Carib girl, was standing in the entrance.

“Man, come here!” she timidly enunciated, in broken Spanish. “Two white women—both afraid.”

Val sprang to the door.

His mother and sweetheart were standing just outside of it.

“Mabel!”

“Valentine!”

The cries were simultaneous.

Then the lovers were in each other's arms, while the Widow Venture, sobbing for thankfulness, was pressing one of her son's hands to her bosom.

CHAPTER XLVI.

REUNITED.

THE first transports of this reunion being somewhat subsided, the story of the fugitives' escape from the brigantine was soon told, after which Val gave the necessary explanation on his own account.

“Still, I can scarcely comprehend it all,” exclaimed the young man, at last.

“It is simply a happy dream come true!” cried Mabel, joyously.

“Say, rather, the will of Heaven fulfilled,” interposed Mrs. Venture.

Both she and Mabel were looking in splendid physical health, and now, as their faces, which had doubtless long been anxious and troubled, began to brighten under the sun of their new-found happiness, they even seemed to have grown more lovely than ever.

Mistress Venture carried a small Bible in her hand, while Kalah had gone into the hut, whence the wounded man's voice was presently heard querulously demanding the presence of “Santa Marguerita.”

“I must go to him,” said Mistress Venture, simply. “John Gabo's hours are numbered, and, as I believe him to be truly penitent, I ought to be with him to the last.”

“But wait!” said Val. “Time flies, and all this delay may give Caliban and his desperadoes a hint of our operations against him.”

“Do not be uneasy on that score, Valentine,” interposed Mabel. “Caliban is also sore with a severe wound, and his subordinate scoundrels are both mutinous and discouraged.”

“Too much so to think of hazarding another attack upon us?”

“Indeed, yes! I am quite sure that, at least for a while, they will be content with merely trying to wear out the patience of your privateersmen. The repulse they met with was a bitter and a bloody one.”

“And you think they do not anticipate a direct attack from us?”

“They regard their position as absolutely invulnerable. When your mother is in readiness, I will take you to the retreat we have discovered still higher up in the mountain. Such a spot! and entirely overlooking the land-locked bay in which the Vulture is moored.”

The cries of the sufferer for “Santa Marguerita” continuing, the widow now passed into the hut, and the lovers were thus left alone.

Both felt, however, that there was neither place nor time for the endearments they so longed to indulge in; and, after one lingering embrace, Val hastened to satisfy himself on certain points in the eventful past that were as yet unexplained.

“Have Caliban and Gabo,” he inquired, “really treated you and my mother with the respectful consideration I have been given to understand?”

“Yes,” replied Mabel. “We managed to touch their better instincts—chiefly through their religious or superstitious fanaticism, I suppose—almost directly after becoming their prisoners. And, on the mere score of personal treatment, we have had nothing to complain of since.”

“They must be very exceptional persons in many ways.”

“In almost all ways! Indeed, I sometimes have thought them not wholly responsible beings, and your mother has agreed with me.”

“You could induce them to forego blood-shedding, but no more?”

“That is just it, and we had to content ourselves with that—which was something.”

“I should say so!”

“Apart from their piratical practices, we seemed capable of influencing them to almost anything, save only the subject of our release. That they would not listen to for an instant. The mere suggestion made them suspicious and harsh-mannered for days. So finally we no longer referred to it, and had almost abandoned all hope of escaping.”

“What of Vargo?”

“That terrible and incomprehensible being! And he is with you—you rescued him from the sandy rock on which Caliban had marooned him?”

“Yes; just as I have related to you.”

“I scarcely know what to think of that dreadful man. He sometimes seemed to me as both more and less than human. Your mother and I instinctively dreaded him from the first. Perhaps, the less I say about him the better.”

“Perhaps so.”

“However, I tried to save him from being marooned, even after his open quarrel with Caliban and the unmasking of his contemplated treachery. But in vain.”

“Yes, I know. The man is an enigma. Now, as to your escape. When did you manage it?”

“Yesterday morning at daybreak.”

“And how?”

“Well, it is quite a story, Valentine, but I will try to make it as short as possible.

“After their repulse they came back to the brigantine—what was left of them—at about midnight, with many of their number wounded—Caliban and Gabo among others—and in a furiously sullen mood.

“Besides, a whole boat-load of them, including twenty-four men, had been altogether exterminated.

“Your mother and I at once busied ourselves among the wounded, and this caused us to be less strictly watched than usual.

“But it was a horrible night, the rest of the crew being drunk and riotous, almost beyond Caliban's control, till the brigantine was made to resemble pandemonium, fore and aft.

“Gabo was delirious, having received a terrible gunshot wound in the back of the head.

“Kalah, the young Carib woman you have seen, had come on board the day previous, and a smattering knowledge of Spanish, which she had somehow picked up, together with her comeliness and good-nature, had quickly rendered her something of a privileged character among the crew.

“But from the very outset she had seemed to take a great liking for John Gabo.

“The girl was very useful in assisting us with the wounded men, and Gabo, being about the most hopeless case we had, naturally received the most attention from the three of us.

“Well, when your mother and I, greatly worn out, and having made our sufferers as comfortable as we could, were thinking of retiring to our cabin, it being then within a short time of daybreak, Kalah came to us with a distressed look.

“‘Gabo is gone!’ she exclaimed, in the Spanish or mongrel patois which we had come to understand.

“At first we thought she meant that he was dead. But she took us to the corner of the cockpit where he had been lying, and, tapping her forehead and pointing first to the empty pallet and then to an open port close at hand, she signified that he had escaped in this way out of the ship in his delirium and swum to the shore, which was but a cable's-length away.

“Well, at first we could scarcely credit it, for we knew that the lagoon and its little lakes fairly teemed with both alligators and sharks of the most ravenous description.

“But Kalah declared so earnestly that she had looked out of the port and actually seen the man make his way to the shore, unharmed, that we were compelled to believe her.

“She then said:

“‘You two are not happy here. Come away then with me. I love John Gabo, old and silent as he is. I follow him. Come with me. There is a hut high in the mountain. My people never or seldom go there. They are afraid of the evil spirits there. But I, Kalah, fear not. I will take John and you there with me. Or I will take you yet higher up to a wild spot, where my people never go, and where these bloody men can never find us. Come along, you two. Bananas and custard-apples and mangoes and plantains are abundant. We may be very happy and live a thousand years.’

“With that, she noiselessly sprang into the port-hole and earnestly beckoned us to follow her down into the lagoon.”

CHAPTER XLVII.

MABEL CONTINUES HER STORY—ANOTHER SURPRISE.

“It suddenly struck your good mother and I,” continued Mabel, “that here at last was our opportunity to escape from the pirates, with perhaps a chance of subsequently communicating with you and Mr. Ringbolt, Valentine, on your brave privateer.

“We were alone in the cockpit, save for the poor wounded men, who would be in no mood for observing our actions.

“However, we could not think of plunging with the Carib girl into those shark-infested waters, and we made known our objections to her.

“‘You are right,’ said Kalah, thoughtfully. ‘I might escape the man-eaters, for I can swim like a bonito, but your white bodies would be very tempting morsels. Wait; I will manage it.’

“She then slipped noiselessly out into the lagoon.

“We hardly thought to ever see her again, and, thrusting our heads through the port, peered anxiously down into the water, which was furtively touched by moonbeams where the black shadow of the steep forested shore did not quite cover over the anchorage.

“But she had wholly disappeared, though many sharks were moving about on the surface.

“However, Kalah had cunningly dived underneath the monsters, and presently we made her out, cautiously approaching us in the brigantine's small boat, which she had unloosed from its painter at the stern without being detected.

“Kalah used one of the oars over the stern of the skiff, after the manner of a scull, with great expertness and with absolute noiselessness.

“Now we would not have drawn back from our adventure for anything in the world. Indeed, as we lowered ourselves into the boat, and were silently sculled away from the accursed ship, whose decks were still tumultuous with riotous and drunken desperadoes, it seemed that we were leaving a veritable hell behind us, with a prospect of heavenly repose for at least a brief period in the future.

“We were not missed, and soon gained the shore. Here we were so fortunate, soon after it had become broad day, as to meet Mr. Gabo, wandering aimlessly about in the woods, with his hands pressed to his wounded head, from which he had frantically torn away the bandages.

"Luckily, Mistress Venture had been thoughtful enough to bring away some cotton strips from the cockpit of the brigantine.

"With these we rebandaged the wounded man's head, after which Kalah conducted us up the mountain to this hut.

"Gabo was unable to go any further, and he has been here, chiefly under the faithful girl's care, ever since.

"But we could not feel safe from pursuit here. It seemed not far enough up the mountain. So Kalah piloted us yet further on to the extraordinary cave that I am anxious to show to you. There your mother and I have remained, though occasionally making visits down here to the hut, for the purpose of seeing about Mr. Gabo."

Mabel had just finished her narrative, when the widow reappeared at the door of the hut, and silently beckoned to them with an unmistakable gesture.

John Gabo was evidently near his last gasp when Val and Mabel followed her into the hut.

An ebony crucifix was clutched at his breast in one of his rigid hands, and his eyes were glassing, while his bosom rose and fell laboriously.

He was still speaking, or trying to do so, almost constantly, and somewhat less ramblingly than before.

"Where are you, Santa Marguerita?" he cried, wildly. "You would not abandon my poor soul at this dread hour—say that you would not, Santa Marguerita!"

"No, no!" the widow placed her pitying touch upon his brow. "I shall not desert you in your extremity, John Gabo. There; you can feel my hand."

"*Gracias, gracias, milles gracias!*" fervently. "*Dios y paz, Dios y paz!* But tell me again, Santa Marguerita, that I shall not go to hell!"

"I am praying for you, John Gabo. You have been a bad man, but if your repentance is sincere, there is hope of salvation for you."

"A bad man!" repeated the dying pirate, almost in a scream. "*Sacramento!* I have been a fiend! Even Vargo cannot have been much more wicked than I! Ha! thunders of dying groans and rivers of blood! But I do repent—I swear I do, Santa Marguerita! for I can't very well help it here at this pass. Will that save me from hell?"

"Alas! I can only hope that it may, John Gabo. Here, kiss this, too, and try to pray for mercy!"

By a superhuman effort he had raised the crucifix to his lips, and was kissing it wildly, but when she presented to them her little Bible, that he might kiss that likewise, he thrust her hand away and burst into a mad laugh.

After that he knew her no longer, and his speech was the ravings of his delirium.

"Send Caliban to me!" he shrieked. "He must divide those jewels with me. It isn't fair that he should carry them secreted over his person, and hardly give me a sight of them any more. Give them to me, Caliban!"

He thought he was in his terrible son's presence now, and that a dispute was going on between them.

"What! you will not let me have them? Oh, Caliban! and you would strike me—me, your poor, wicked old father? *Diablo!* but this is hard! What do I want with them? What is that to you? Weren't they a part of Blackbeard's blood-treasure, and mine by right of discovery? Oh, Caliban! why did you not come far away with me, as I prayed you to do, when first we chanced upon these jewels? I did not want to be a pirate again. I was grown old and weary of crime, and Captain Hiram so trusted me as his honest man of affairs."

"Ha! what is that? Keep him off, Caliban, as you love me! It is Vargo—Vargo, the mysterious, the deadly, the inscrutable! Nonsense! 'tis he, Vargo, and none other. Maroon him? maroon the devil! Keep him off, I say! How he laughs and jeers! He will drink my blood as you'd quaff your wine. Off—off—off!"

A last hoarse cry—then the rattle in the throat—a great stiffening of the convulser frame.

John Gabo was gone to his final account.

"How I tried to save him, to bring him to the truth!" faltered Mistress Venture, the tears rolling down her cheeks. "But perhaps it was not in me or in any one."

She sunk upon her knees in silent prayer. The Carib girl had already thrown herself upon the body, and was motionless there as if she, too, had yielded up the animate spark.

A little later on Val was conducted by his mother and by Mabel away from the tragic scene, which he rejoiced at exceedingly.

"How far is it to this cave of refuge to which you are leading me?" he presently demanded.

"It is not very far, Valentine," Mabel replied, "though it is somewhat difficult of access. We shall soon be there."

And they continued to climb up a steep and tortuous path.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

HOPE AHEAD.

In fact, the way up through the mountain forest was so very difficult that the young man

and his sweet companions were soon compelled to rest for a recovery of strength and breath.

"What is there so remarkable about your secret cave?" asked Val.

"Oh," replied Mabel, smiling, "for one thing it looks right down upon the brigantine, hundreds of feet below, besides over pretty much everywhere!"

"Is that all?"

"As if it were not enough. But there is much more, however. It must have been occupied briefly many years ago. For there is something just at the edge of the cliff—a large object—secured there and covered up very closely, as if it might be of some value. Though thus far we have been unable to discover what it is. It might be a little house, for the size of it."

Val still suspected nothing of the truth, and the difficult march was accordingly resumed.

No sooner, however, had they reached the spot indicated—a rock-roofed mountain shelf, overlooking "all creation," as he might have said—than he sprung forward with a joyful cry.

The inexplicable hidden object, which Mabel had referred to, lay conspicuously before him.

"Is this your enigma?" he cried, slapping the shape with his hand.

"Yes!" replied his companions, in a breath; "what is it?"

"The culverin, the swivel-gun!" His jack-knife was already at work on the time-stained tarpaulin covering. "Everything is as Vargo asserted. Hurrah! I may be able to bombard the Black Vulture, single-handed, from the very clouds, and thus furnish the signal for our boat attack, even at this late hour."

Hundreds of feet below lay the brigantine in her mountain-folded lagoon-lake retreat.

The swivel was found to be in an excellent state of preservation, and so were the charges of powder and ball that had been *cached* beside it.

Even unaided, Val discovered that he could manipulate the gun; the depression necessary to be obtained was not too great; and the ladies could assist him in handling the ammunition.

"How strange I should never have suspected this concealed monster's real nature!" exclaimed Mabel, while the work of getting the piece in thorough readiness was going bravely on.

"The idea of its being a cannon did suggest itself to me," observed Mistress Venture, "but then I put it aside as altogether too preposterous for serious consideration."

The brigantine was evidently wholly unsuspecting of her danger.

Her deck-watch could be seen lounging lazily about, and a man, recognized at a glance as Caliban himself, was smoking listlessly on the quarter-deck.

Others of the ship's company were sprawling asleep under awnings forward.

All the boats were in their places, showing that, in all probability, no expedition of any kind was absent from the ship.

A scene of tropic indolence and repose, which it seemed a pity to disturb, though hardly a reflection of this nature crossed the mind of the now enthusiastic young privateersman.

At last the culverin was in thorough position, and loaded with ball.

Then an unforeseen difficulty presented itself.

Val had lost the tinder-box he had been in the habit of carrying upon his person, together with his only pistol, whose flint-lock might have furnished the requisite fire.

There was priming, but no fire.

"Hold on!" cried the young man, at last, only temporarily disconcerted. "I have read of a way the savages have of producing fire, which I ought to be able to imitate."

The necessary hard and soft woods were at hand; his jack-knife quickly fashioned the simple implements, and after a vigorous friction of the materials thus obtained, a piece of lint was ignited, and a small fire kindled therefrom well back into the grotto.

Then the gun at the edge of the precipice was touched off, and discharged with a tremendous roar, that doubtless went echoing for miles throughout the island-fastnesses, and even far out to sea.

Hardly had the smoke cleared away, with an attendant hurrah on the part of Val, when the trio peered down over the ledge to observe the effects of the shot.

These had been simply tremendous.

The solid shot had plowed through the brigantine's deck just abaft the catheads.

The wildest confusion and panic were already observable on board.

The pirates were rushing to their weapons, and many were the startled glances cast upward.

But at this critical instant a series of shouts arose from somewhere down and back of the Eyrie, and steps were heard trampling and hurrying up the mountain path.

"The savages—the Caribs!" cried Val, and drawing his sword, hesprung between his shrinking companions and anticipated danger.

But it was not the Caribs.

The shouts were encouraging ones, and, when

they were repeated, it was manifest that they were the voices of friends.

Then the interrupted land-expedition from the privateer, with the mysterious ex-pirate at its head, burst into view.

"Vargo!" exclaimed Mistress Venture, recoiling.

"Vargo!" echoed Mabel, imitating her example.

But the whilom lieutenant of the brigantine only waved his sword in courteous greeting, and then the explanations were speedily exchanged.

The expedition, after fleeing panic-stricken before the unexpected Carib attack, had at last rallied so determinedly that most of the savages had been put to the sword, while the rest were put to flight.

Then the march up the mountain by means of the secret path (which Val had already blundered upon by the most fortunate of accidents) had been resumed.

The dead body of John Gabo in the hut below, together with such explanations as Vargo had been enabled to extract from the girl, Kalah, had furnished the adventurers with the key to the situation; then the roar of that initial shot from the culverin had evoked the cheers of the expeditionary force; and here they were, twenty men all told, and perhaps a couple of hours behind time, but what of that?

Instantly the work of the swivel-gun was resumed, hot and fast.

In addition to that, the muskets were brought into requisition, and volley after volley rained down upon the decks and rigging of the devoted corsair ship.

While this was going on the widow and Mabel shrunk back into the deepest nook of the grotto, while Val and Vargo occasionally peered down through the smoke to observe the effects of it all.

"Caliban will die game!" said Vargo, at last. "Look! the rascals are already protecting their heads with timbers, while mooring in closer under the cliffs."

"It will do them little good," cried Val. "But why don't our boats put in an appearance?"

"Give them time, *comandaro*," was the imperturbable reply. "*Caramba!* we kept them waiting long enough for the signal, and besides, it is slow and tortuous rowing up through the lagoon. I've tried it, and ought to know."

In the mean time, though it was evident that numbers of the pirates had been stricken down by the iron and leaden rain from the clouds, it was equally manifest, by reason of the small caliber of the swivel-gun, that the damage effected upon the brigantine itself was not of a vital nature.

Moreover, it was perceived that the pirates had recovered from their panic, and would presently be able to moor so closely in under the overhangs of the mountain as to be in comparative safety from this airy attack.

After that, a blind and desperate rush up the steep on their part might be expected.

But at this critical juncture a wild hurrah burst from the young privateersman's lips.

"The boats! the boats!" he cried. "There they come!"

"It is true," said Vargo, preparing to lead his party down to the water's edge. "Captain Caliban," with a wicked gleam in his inscrutable eyes, "and I may presently have the opportunity of settling that little personal misunderstanding of ours."

The boating expedition was now seen to burst into full view with a tremendous cheer, and then the fight for the possession of the pirate's decks was on hand in desperate and bloody earnest.

Val had decided to follow on down the mountain, as an escort for the ladies, more leisurely.

"Don't forget," he called out to Vargo, as the latter was leading the men down the cliff, "what I told you! Caliban carries those precious jewels distributed over his person."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE PIRATES' DOOM.

TWENTY minutes later, when Captain Val, after much difficulty, had succeeded in reaching the bottom of the mountain, with his mother and Mabel in charge, he hid them out of harm's way in the forest, and then started for the edge of the lagoon, where the battle could be heard raging with intense fury.

As he did so, Kalah, who had silently followed the trio down the steps, called after him, in her melancholy and musical voice.

"I shall take care of the beautiful women, young man!" she said. "All my people must be dead now, but I will see that no harm comes to these two."

"That is right, Kalah," replied Val. "Be faithful to these dear ones, and you shall be richly rewarded."

Then, after a hasty parting embrace with his mother and his sweetheart, he hurried away.

On reaching the water's edge, however, he was compelled, temporarily at least, to look upon the fight for the possession of the brigantine in which he could take no part, as there was no boat by which he could cross the intervening water-space, which was literally swarming with

sharks, with here and there a crocodile blinking expectantly on a sun-scorched reedy bank.

The privateer's boats had made fast, and their fighters were already in possession of the brigantine's fore-castle-run, while Vargo and his knot of bravos were just succeeding in ferrying themselves across the interval, on a rude raft of logs, and behind a yet ruder barricade at its forward part, which somewhat protected them from the shots showered upon them from the pirate's waist and stern chasings while they were poling their way.

In the mean time the pirates were fairly at bay, and making a desperate struggle for very existence.

Driven back from their forward decks, after a terrible but unavailing effort to prevent the boarders from grappling on, they had thrown up a sort of barricade about midway, and aft of that were keeping up a struggle which might yet succeed in beating back their assailants permanently, unless Vargo and his raft-party should wholly succeed in grappling on at the brigantine's after-chasings, the chief object in view on the part of the latter.

Ringbolt, Dunbar, Maltby and others could be seen conspicuously on the side of the assailants, while Caliban, terrible in the excitement of battle, though haggard from his still recent wound, was little short of ubiquitous on his part.

The decks were already littered with the dead and dying; shots were pouring thick and fast "like lightning from the mountain cloud;" and every now and then there would be a splash where some disabled wretch would plunge through the shattered bulwarks into the lagoon, when there would be a hungry rush of sharks to the spot with a commotion that lashed the blood-streaked waters into foam.

Steel-flashes, shots, curses, shouts and yells; men, no longer in the image of their Creator, but as fiends incarnate, grappling like a medley of jungle wild beasts for the mastery; a burning hell-segment of passion, hate and murder.

And all this in the bosoming loveliness of a rich tropical retreat, which should have been the very home of heavenly quiet, indolence, languor and repose.

It was one of those startling paradoxes which the evil passions of mankind impose upon the patience of nature—a scene of paradisaic peace and loveliness, in which "only the spirit of mortal is vile."

Mabel's last whispered words to her lover, upon parting with him, had been these, accompanied by an earnestness and gravity of manner which were a sufficient guarantee of her noble disinterestedness.

"If you can consistently save Caliban to future repentance, I pray you, Valentine, to do so. Nature has been capriciously ungenerous to that strange being—he is not the diabolical enigma that Vargo is—and he may be worth the saving—a brand plucked from the burning."

His reply had been a silent kiss, which had, nevertheless, signified his assent.

But how to keep that promise?

As well, almost, might he think to snatch a self-devoted victim out of the jaws of a certain and all-embracing doom.

However, at this critical juncture, his glance, momentarily diverted from the desperate contest, chanced to rest upon the prow of an abandoned native fire-hollowed canoe just peeping out of a tuft of reeds not far away.

It proved to be in good condition, though moss-grown and old, and there was a paddle in it.

A few moments later Val, heedless of his own safety, and conscientiously intent upon at least an attempt to keep faith with that silent pledge, was in the canoe, and paddling swiftly out in the direction of the brigantine.

But he was too late.

"Hold, Vargo, hold!" he shouted, just as the ex-pirate and his band were in the act of grappling the starboard stern overhung of the pirate, in the midst of a shower of bullets and missiles. "Demand Caliban's surrender, with a promise of mercy! I command it!"

His voice was drowned amid the din of the furious conflict, now at its very climax, and would doubtless have been unheeded, if heard.

At that very instant, Vargo, hanging by one hand to the brigantine's rail, and fighting like a demon with the other, was forced higher up by the men swarming up behind and around him, while the handful of pirates defending the gunwale momentarily gave way.

The next moment Vargo had bounded like a tiger over the rail, and his sea-bravos were at his heels with blood-thirsty yells.

At the same juncture, a fresh charge aft, on the part of the privateersmen in possession of the fore-castle, swept everything—men, guns, barricade—before it; and Caliban was almost alone at the mizzenmast, performing prodigies of desperate valor, and hoarsely shouting to rally a last stand on the part of his thinned and melting force.

Then the entire deck was the scene of a desperate hand-to-hand contest, in which pistols, cutlasses, hatchets, belaying-pins and capstan-bars were used indiscriminately.

And, as Val at last succeeded in climbing the fore-chains, and leaping over the rail, Caliban and Vargo were already locked in a death-grapple on the port side.

Each had lost his sword, and, swaying back and forth at the edge of the broken guard, the men were tearing at each other's throats like grappling wild beasts.

Powerful and dangerous a man as Vargo was, under equal circumstances he would have been but a toy in the tremendous grip of Caliban, who was now, however, shorn of much of his original strength by reason of his recent wound, to say nothing of his theretofore exhaustive employment in the general affray, which made the present personal encounter more of an equal match.

"Hold, there, hold!" cried Val, springing forward, sword in hand, through the press. "Vargo, give over! Caliban, surrender to me, and mercy shall be shown you!"

Still too late!

Before he could reach them they went overboard with a crash, still locked in that grapple of death.

They were never seen again, and the sharks were at high carnival in the blood-dyed waters that were being lashed to ruddy foam over the spot where they had disappeared.

Even with the loss of their leader, the outnumbered pirates only gave way slowly, contesting inch by inch; but it was with the energy of despair, and they were doomed.

The privateersmen were no less maddened by victory than were their opponents by defeat, for the triumph had already cost them more than a third of their force.

Quarter was neither given nor asked.

The pirates were exterminated to a man.

A slow match attached to the brigantine's powder-magazine, and industriously sizzling within six inches of success, was discovered and stamped out in the nick of time.

The Black Vulture, together with a vast amount of valuables, was at last a prize to the indomitable Spray Sprite, though at a terrible cost.

Caliban's jewel-share of the Blackbeard treasure, however, having been in all probability concealed upon his person, were, as a matter of course, gone beyond recovery.

"Never mind, my hearty!" was Ringbolt's consoling remark to Val when made aware of the loss. "We're not to forget the companion treasure-bag that I took the precaution of burying near New London, though contrary to your wishes. And, even with nothing else than your angel mother and young Mistress Mabel restored to the world, should we not be contented beyond the wildest dream that filthy lucre ever summoned on deck at the lookout announcement of Avarice?"

We may well believe that the veteran was on hand to assist the young commander in taking the ladies on board one of the boats, with such of their personal effects as were secured out of the brigantine, for conveyance to the privateer.

The latter remained in the Pelican Sea, recuperating, for several days; and then, after once more regaining the open ocean through El Paso del Diablo, sailed direct for France, accompanied by her corsair prize.

Three more considerable prizes were captured by the Spray Sprite on her passage thither, though her young commander was not on the alert for ocean spoils quite so eagerly as before, now that his fair mother and beautiful sweetheart were once more in safety, and La Rochelle was finally reached in the middle of the ensuing September, after a signally stormy voyage of several months' duration.

CHAPTER L.

CONCLUSION.

WITHIN three months after the return of the Spray Sprite to La Rochelle there was a double wedding at Bordeaux, where Mabel Ferris had gone to join her father, and Mistress Venture had also taken up her temporary residence at the request of her gallant son.

Doesn't it almost go without saying, as the polite Frenchmen are wont to observe, that the couples of this double marriage were Val Venture with the beautiful Mabel Ferris and Mr. Thomas Ringbolt with the still comely and fascinating Mistress Margaret Venture?

At all events, such was the fact.

Not the slightest objection was offered by Captain Ferris to the marriage of his daughter with the man of her choice; while, as for the elder couple, they were simply certain that in pleasing themselves they were meeting with the cordial sympathy and approbation of both Val and Mabel.

Captain Ferris had become a completely saddened and dispirited old man, with no longer any special interest.

He accordingly considerably quitted it before the close of the war, and, though his daughter dutifully mourned his death, there was no pronounced demonstration of inconsolable grief elsewhere over the fact of his disappearance from the theater of an existence which he had never adorned.

Not long after Captain Hiram's death there

came to Bordeaux an account of a somewhat mysterious disappearance off the Cornish Coast.

A wealthy and titled gentleman, apparently not altogether in his right mind, had suddenly set sail for the open sea in a small yacht, wholly unaccompanied by any other being.

A storm had soon after sprung up, and, as he was never heard of again, there could be little doubt that he had sooner or later miserably perished.

The name and title of the unfortunate gentleman was Lord Cecil Rathspey, and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions as to the causes that had prompted him to such an end.

The Spray Sprite continued in commission, though not invariably with Captain Val in actual command, as a letter-of-marque privateer in the American service to the end of the war, which resulted in establishing the United States among the nations of the earth.

But, through a number of causes, she did not maintain the distinction she had earned early in her career.

At the conclusion of the Revolutionary struggle, however, she was sold to the French Government, and her fate was in keeping with her character.

Being fairly "cornered" by two British vessels, a corvette and an armed brig, either of which was her superior in guns and men, in the port of Montevideo, with no chance of escaping, she boldly sailed out of the bay and tackled the hostile pair with courageous persistency.

The unequal engagement was only terminated by the dauntless, but at last unfortunate privateer blowing up, with the loss of every soul on board.

A gallant, though tragic ending for as gallant a craft as ever fluttered flag or cleft blue water with adventurous prow!

But the almost continuous success of the Spray Sprite had before this greatly enriched both Val Venture and Tom Ringbolt, besides putting plenty of prize money in the pockets of every American sailor that had ever sailed in her without finding death in wild sea-battle or in running wave.

But for all that, the companion bag of jewels from the Blackbeard treasure which Ringbolt had secretly buried on the sea-beach in the vicinity of New London may remain secreted there to the present day, for all the writer knows to the contrary.

At all events, it never came back into the possession of Ringbolt and Val.

They were not enabled to revisit New London till toward the close of the year 1781, the last of the war.

The town and its neighboring forts had then been but recently captured and burnt over by the British expedition from New York, under the direction of the infamous Benedict Arnold.

All land-marks thereabouts had consequently been effaced beyond precise recall, and the search for the buried treasure, though long diligently prosecuted, was never successful.

The descendants of Val Venture and his beautiful Puritan bride are very numerous along the Connecticut shore.

This is all.

THE END.

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